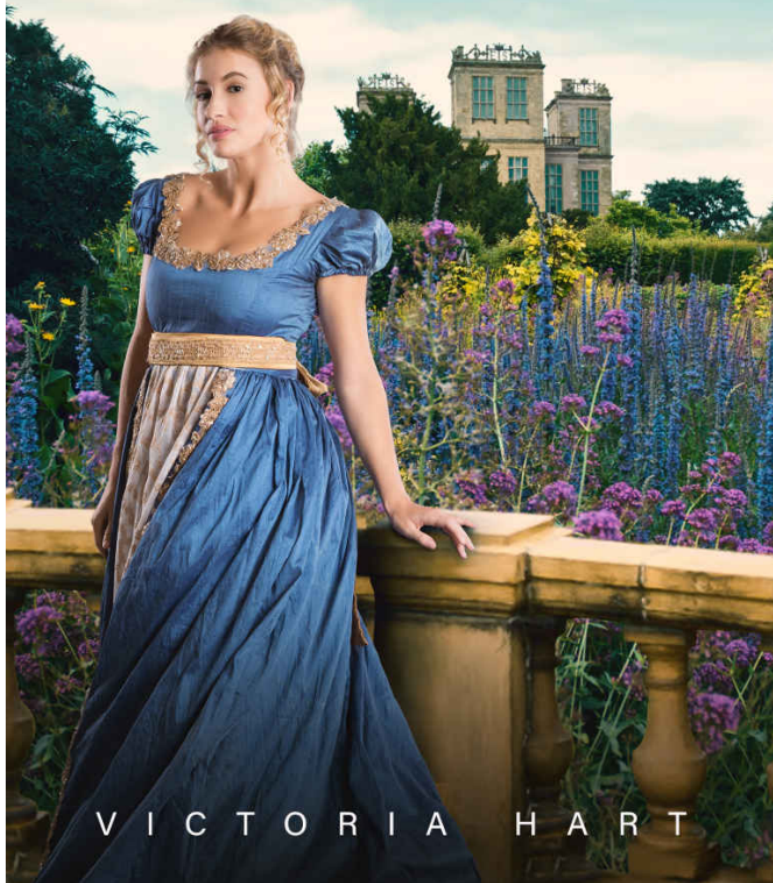


BECOMING
The Countess
OF OAKFIELD



V I C T O R I A H A R T

Becoming the Countess of Oakfield

Victoria Hart

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Also by Victoria Hart

Chapter One

*Pendleton Hall
Mersey Chapel, England
Winter, 1812*

Abby Greene shivered in the cold. From under her plain white cap, long tendrils of soft blonde hair swirled around her red cheeks. Her hands were frozen and her teeth chattered as she dumped the bucket of dirty water onto the ground. High above her, the dark sky threatened more snow as flakes swirled around her in the frigid air. She breathed in the scent of sudsy water that puddled around her feet, the sharp smell of the harsh lye making her wrinkle her nose in disgust. She detested that smell, the smell of the strong soap that she was obliged to use to scrub the floors of the kitchen and the servants' hall of the great big house she called home. Not that it was actually her home, but it was where she lived for now. She was a housemaid, and she lived with the family she served. That family was the Pendletons.

"Curse them," she said under her breath as she spat on the ground, quickly so that no one could see her. It would never do if her disgust for the family she served became known. She would be out of a job without any hope of finding another position if her mistress or any of her dreadful children knew how Abby really felt about them. Not that she was alone in her disgust. The Pendletons were universally loathed, but were tolerated out of necessity by the staff who served them.

The cold bit at her fingers as she gripped the bucket. She wished she could stay inside where it was warm, but she knew all too well that there were chores to be done that the winter weather could not delay. The rugs had to be beaten, the laundry scrubbed and hung out to dry, and whatever else the cook or the housekeeper told her to do. Sighing, she looked up at the sky. The clouds were thick, giving the morning the dark appearance of late afternoon. There was not a single ray of sunlight to warm her face or her hands,

nothing to give her any hope of comfort.

Abby longed for the warmth of spring, for the endless sunny days when she did not mind being outside, when she longed for any excuse to be in the courtyard behind the red brick house. But she knew that spring was far away. It was Christmas; the season was upon them, and she would have even more work to do. Dresses would have to be mended and pressed, dancing slippers would have to be repaired over and over, hair curled, coats and hats brushed. Extra dishes would be prepared, cakes and tarts and punches. The work seemed endless; there were so many tasks for her to do as one of a pair of maids serving the family. The days would leave her too exhausted to enjoy any of the pleasures of the long season, even if she wished that she might.

Turning back to the house, she stood for a moment despite the cold and gazed up at the third-floor attic, her hazel eyes resting on the glint of glass close to the rooftop. In one of the narrow, dingy windows set near a crumbling chimney, she thought she saw movement. Was someone watching her? Perhaps, but it didn't matter. It would only be Rebecca, the other maid, who was too ill to leave the tiny room they shared. She was staying in the servants' quarters in the cold attic today, a place that offered little comfort or warmth for a sick woman who had fallen ill. Abby considered sneaking up the narrow back stairs to see her, to bring her a hot cup of tea. That would show her compassion, and it would also give her a chance to check whether Rebecca was truly ill, or deliberately leaving all of the chores for Abby. She hoped that she was wrong to think so, but she had a terrible suspicion that Rebecca was jealous of her – and why should she not be, Abby thought smugly as she walked back to the kitchen. She was engaged, was she not? She would soon be married. That was reason for anyone to be envious, especially a woman like Rebecca who would surely never leave the service of the onerous Pendletons.

The Pendletons, what a dreadful lot they were. She wished that there was some other family she may serve, but she had no other choice. If it wasn't for the Pendletons, she was convinced that her life would be as perfect as could be for a simple village girl. But she should be grateful, she supposed. They did pay her, provide her with a cramped room and a cot, food, and the occasional book that she BV from their musty library. Secreted, but never stole. She was not that kind of girl. Besides, why should any of the three daughters

and two sons care about an occasional book that she borrowed? It was not like they had any use for them. Not a single Pendleton read, not the wife, the children, or Sir George Pendleton, although she wondered if he might enjoy a good novel, if his eyesight were not so poor.

If only she worked for Sir George all by himself, she would not mind being a maid, not a bit. He was a kind, generous man, but he was not a courageous one. His wife, a shrew of a woman, ran roughshod over him and the entire household. So did her daughters and her sons, all as mean-spirited as she was. How Sir George ever married such a woman and fathered a brood so unlike him was a mystery that Abby never understood and did not care to dwell upon. She had heard the gossip in the servants' hall, that the missus was the one with all the money and Sir George had the breeding – but it didn't matter much to her. Why should it? She was not going to be a housemaid for very much longer.

Stepping across the threshold of the back door that led to the servants' hall and the kitchen, she wiped the snow from her shoes, mindful of the freshly scrubbed floor – the one she had labored over for an hour. She knew well enough not to take pride in her work; there was little use taking pride in doing anything around the house. Her hard work, like the constant dull aches she felt from it or the endless hours it took, was never appreciated. Not by the tyrant of a cook, the waspish housekeeper, or the missus. Nor was it appreciated by the daughters (all young women out in society) or their brothers, men who gambled too much and were far too forward in their attentions to every girl in the county, including her. She would soon be free of this predicament. She would not have to wait much longer to be away from all this.

"There you are. Taking your time, I see. I ought to see that the missus docks your wages for your idleness," Mrs. Patrick, the housekeeper, grumbled at Abby as she scuttled like a rat from its hole, popping her gray-haired head from the dark chamber she used as her own private sitting room.

"I wasn't being idle; I was working," Abby explained, knowing that her efforts were futile.

"You were being idle, standing about. Don't tell me any different! Get to work, or I'll see someone else in your position by teatime!" the older woman snapped.

Abby bit her tongue and rushed past the woman, making her

way to the kitchen as the housekeeper continued to bark orders at her. "Hurry with that bucket! You still have the laundry that needs doing; Miss Charlotte ruined her ballgown last night. That will need to be mended, and what of Rebecca's tea?"

At the mention of Rebecca, Abby's mood cheered. What luck, she thought to herself, that Mrs. Patrick should ask her to take up the tea for Rebecca. Tea, what a terrible joke that was, a weak watery beverage was all that would be sent, a brew that was only slightly better than the one she herself could expect, but Abby would dutifully see to it. Rebecca, the other housemaid, was a great favorite of the housekeeper and the missus. If Abby had been stricken by illness, she would have been expected to work, she could be certain, and not left to lie about in bed all day while someone toted her tea.

"Tea for Rebecca, I'll see to it right away," Abby called out as she bustled into the kitchen, leaving the housekeeper frowning behind her.

"Tea for Rebecca, fat lot of good that will do her. There isn't a cure for what ails her," the cook exclaimed with a snort as she set the large kettle on the stove. "Tea for a maid, the very idea! Why Mrs. Patrick dotes on her, I will never know."

Abby wanted to answer with an affirmative, but she knew better than to gossip. Among the small staff employed by the Pendletons, there was always someone willing to talk out of turn, and Abby had no wish for Rebecca to know of her suspicions. She did not think the other maid was honestly ill, just struck by envy and laziness. Plopping the bucket down on the floor, she listened as the cook, Mrs. Henry, continued to give her opinions about Rebecca.

"That Rebecca would feel a sight better if she'd come downstairs and put in a full day's work," Mrs. Henry complained. Mrs. Henry was old, compared to Abby's twenty years. She looked ancient, with a gaunt face and gnarled hands. Despite her grizzled appearance, nothing slowed her down and it was said she could cook anything. It was a talent that was not wasted on the servants – they received poor rations – but the Pendletons seemed happy enough as they ate heaps and platters of the old woman's finest cooking. The missus was proper portly and her daughters, like the sons, were as round as fatted pigs in the fall. It was only Sir George who ate moderately; his proportions were rather skinny compared to the rest of his family.

“To think that Mrs. Patrick has you waiting on Rebecca like you were her maid when there is plenty of work that needs doing in the kitchen. The pans need scouring, the pots will need a proper cleaning – and she has you marching upstairs like a soldier to the war just to take that silly girl her tea.”

“I don’t mind.”

“No, you don’t, do you? You aren’t as spiteful as some that the missus has had working here, I can say that much for you. Never mind that, the water is starting to boil, no need of you wasting any more of your time on this errand than you must. With all the work you have to do, you’ll be lucky to be done by sundown.”

Abby nodded and tried not to think about that. She did have a lot of work to do that day. With her being the only housemaid, she still had the rooms on the first floor to tidy and fires to lay, in addition to the growing list of other chores. How was she to do them all, when Cook needed her, and so did Mrs. Patrick – not to mention the missus and the young Pendleton ladies? They would insist that she help them dress and set their hair. She felt the enormous weight of all these responsibilities heavy on her shoulders.

“What’s the matter, my dear? You’ve grown pale. You wouldn’t be ill, would you? From you, I would believe it to be true,” Cook said as she eyed Abby.

Shaking her head, Abby replied, “I’m not ill.”

“Be careful that you don’t become ill, not when it’s Christmastime. You wouldn’t want to miss going home to your young man.”

Abby brightened again at the thought of Eugene and going home for the day at Christmas. That single day was one of the few she was permitted to have the entire day and not just a few hours off in an afternoon. How many months had it been since she was last home, since she had last seen him? She could not quite recall, but she did remember how he had smiled at her. In his sparkling brown eyes and handsome grin, there had been so many unspoken promises.

Mrs. Henry mused aloud, “What did he call himself? Eugene?”

“His name is Eugene, and we are to be married,” Abby answered as she felt her heart flutter inside her chest. Eugene, what a man he was. A big, strong, strapping man who could one day very soon be her husband.

Chuckling, the older woman replied, "You're taken with him, to be sure. Look at that smile on your face. It will be any day now that you'll be giving your notice to the missus, if you have your way."

Abby blushed as her closely guarded hopes and dreams came pouring out of her mouth before she could stop them. "What if it's this winter? I could be a bride by spring, with my own cottage!"

"A bride! You would make a good one, to be sure. You're a hard worker, any man would be glad to have you."

"I don't want any man, only Eugene," Abby answered as she wrapped the handle of the tea kettle with her apron, careful not to burn herself. Her fingers were still numb from being outside in the winter weather. The heat rising from the bubbling kettle made her draw in her breath as the nerves in her hands tingled back to life in sharp painful bursts, but she didn't mind so much. She would rather feel heat than cold any time.

"Best be getting that tea upstairs to your new mistress. Mark my words, that Rebecca will come to a bad end if she's not careful about her ways. Idle as she is, she won't find a man who will have her!"

Nodding as she poured the scalding water over the tea leaves, Abby was dreaming of Eugene and the short holiday she would enjoy in the nearby village, her true home. Of course, nearby was not so very near. She hoped she could catch a ride on a carriage or wagon that was heading that way. That would be better than walking the five miles in the snow—five miles that had kept her from going home for months. The distance was not so intolerable when she had a whole day, but if she only had the afternoon off it was nearly impossible to find a ride back to Pendleton Hall before sunset. She was far too superstitious to want to be walking the roads after dark.

"Don't tarry. There's tea to be put on for the missus and her lot. Best get moving, my girl," Mrs. Henry chided her kindly. "If you don't dawdle, I'll see that you have a treacle tart for your troubles."

Abby, although twenty years old, still brightened at the promise of a tart, just like she would have had she been a child. With her endless hard work and too little help at the modest manor house, extra food was rare and always appreciated. She knew that Mrs. Henry did the best she could with the meager rations that the missus allowed for the servants' meals. If Mrs. Henry promised her a treacle tart, surely one made for the Pendletons' tea, then Abby

was heartily grateful.

“Thank you. I shall be done with this chore as quick as I can!” Abby assured the old woman.

“See that you are. There’s plenty of work for you to do, with Rebecca no help and the missus too miserly to hire a ladies’ maid.”

Abby stifled a giggle at the candid admission as she finished loading the tray with Rebecca’s sparse tea: a bit of plain brown bread and a tiny sliver of cheese was all that would be spared. With thoughts of a freshly baked tart and the upcoming holiday in her mind, she found that going up the flights of stairs to tend to Rebecca was not a chore, but a brief respite in her day. At least, she reasoned, she was inside the house and not out where the wind was howling ferociously. As fierce as the weather had become, there could be no laundry hung out to dry that day. The thought buoyed her spirits nearly as much as thinking about Eugene, her future husband.



* * *

Abby should have been furious, but she could not find the energy to be vexed; not anymore. Rebecca, as she had speculated, was not truly sick, but in a melancholy mood brought on by some unknown cause. That moroseness had festered into a prolonged illness, becoming the chills. Rebecca complained of an ache in her stomach. She claimed to be overcome by fatigue that robbed her of her strength, making it impossible to complete even the simplest of tasks. Abby doubted all this to be true, but could not prove otherwise. Meanwhile, Mrs. Patrick fretted over Rebecca. The housekeeper had seen to it that Rebecca was not to be bothered with work, not until her health had returned. It was said that she had a fever, although no doctor or apothecary had been sent for. The missus would not spare the expense, even for her favorite maid. So it was that Rebecca languished upstairs in her room while Abby was compelled to do twice the work. It was a terribly unfair situation, but one that she was powerless to alter – regardless of the

knowledge that she harbored. Abby knew that late at night, Rebecca was slinking downstairs to the kitchen to steal food meant for the Pendletons' Christmas season celebrations.

She could not prove Rebecca's treachery, nor did she try. She did not want to jeopardize her own position, not now, when she was counting on every penny. She would need them when she and Eugene were married. She planned to set up house for herself, not in a grand style, but better than a girl of her station could usually expect. With her earnings, meager as they were, she could afford a bed, a pair of chairs, and, she hoped, a few pots and pans. She smiled when she thought of the cozy little cottage she would share with Eugene. Perhaps there would money left for a rug for the hearth. She imagined sitting by him at the fireside; he would tell her about his work and she would listen as she served him his tea. That vision was so real that she could smell the scent of the burning wood, feel its warmth, and taste the tea in her mouth. They would be happy together.

It was that delightful vision of the future, of her and her dear Eugene snug together in their cottage, though rain or snow may pelt the thatched roof overhead, that made even the delay in her holiday bearable. Rebecca's antics had caused her own Christmas break to be taken away. After all, how could the Pendletons survive one day without a maid? Rebecca was supposed to work, to see to the young ladies and her mistress, but her illness had proven too severe for her to leave her bed.

Abby was quite sure that the cause of Rebecca's ailment was jealousy. Several unhappy comments had been made about Abby's good fortune before Rebecca's sudden onset of poor health had deemed her unfit to work for several days. But Abby could put that out of her mind for the moment, she mused as she rode in the back of a wagon heading to Mersey Chapel. It was still the Christmas season; Twelfth Night was not yet upon them. Even if Christmas day had come and gone, any day that she was at liberty to visit her father and Eugene was as joyous as Christmas.

Her feet swayed as the wagon hit a rut in the frozen dirt road. She bounced, jostled by the impact, but she did not fall. Her fingers clung to the side of the wagon as she watched the snow fall around her. It was five days after Christmas and the snow showed no sign of abating. Looking down at her feet, she knew that she would very likely have to walk all the way back to the Pendletons' house after

her visit. It was a sobering thought, and maybe it should have deterred her from her visit, but she did not mind even that hardship. Today, she was going home. She had a full day ahead of her, a basket of mince pies from Cook, and a warm welcome surely waiting for her when she arrived unannounced at her father's shop.

Reaching into the basket, she selected the smallest of the pies. Eating it hungrily, she relished the spices that seasoned it, her hunger making the pie taste even better since she had neglected to eat anything before her departure. She would have sat down to have a slice of brown bread and tea in the dark morning, but she feared that if she lingered at Pendleton Hall, Rebecca would be overcome by a relapse in her fever and ruin this day as she so many days before it. The mince pie was soon finished, and she brushed the crumbs from her skirt, satisfied that she would find something to eat at her father's cottage. To see Eugene and her father again, she would be satisfied with anything at all. She would enjoy whatever he had on hand, as she had not had good nourishing fare in many months – or good company to enjoy as she dined.

The wagon slowed as it crested a hill and Abby's heart thumped with anticipation. Turning her head, she was thrilled at the view of the sleepy village of Mersey Chapel below. Smoke rose from chimneys, and the steeple of the village church towered high above the thatched roofs of the cottages. High Street would be bustling with activity even in this wintry weather as the villagers continued their celebrations of the lengthy Christmas season. Even though she had missed the actual day of Christmas, she felt too happy and excited to be bothered about it. Christmas season in the village lasted for many days – over a month, really. From the first week of December to the end of the Twelfth Night revelries, there were wonderful moments to be savored: a visit with her father, perhaps a little shopping? How she would love that, but most of all, she would see Eugene! He was the reason for her visit, was he not? He was the main cause for the smile she wore in these freezing temperatures. She could hardly wait to see him. Every minute was torturous, so much so that she longed to leap from the wagon and run the whole way to the village, but she decided against that. She did not want to ruin her shoes just yet, not when she had taken care to clean them to wear with her very best dress.

Smoothing the long skirt of her dark blue dress, she brushed the pie crumbs from it with her gloved hands. The dress was made of

thin material better suited for spring or summer, but she liked the color. She had been told once that the color was becoming, a compliment she had received from Eugene when he had first become an apprentice to her father. His admiration of the frock alone was enough to elevate the ordinary piece of apparel to beloved status. Of the three dresses she called her own, this was and would always be her best dress, simply because Eugene liked it. Sighing, she thought of him dreamily. She considered herself a most practical girl, but when there was anything involving Eugene she lost all sense of reason. Her common sense quickly abandoned her. She knew that she risked catching her death by choosing to wear so flimsy a dress, but she wanted Eugene to see her looking as lovely as she felt. After such a long time apart from him, and weeks ahead of her before she could give her notice, she wanted to ensure that he would recall her looking her best. It was not a sensible plan, she knew all too well, but she was in love with Eugene. And being in love, she thought a certain amount of silliness must be expected, even if that silliness may cause her to catch an illness.

A real illness, she thought, and not the prolonged lapse into an imagined ailment that Rebecca had concocted conveniently during the busy month of December. Why did Rebecca have to choose December – the busiest of all months, with its endless parties and dinners – to start with her falsehoods and antics? Two maids were too few already, Abby thought, and getting everything done had been nearly impossible. The Pendletons should have employed many more maids and footman than they did, but their finances were not as grand as they would have wished.

But with a toss of her head, Abby decided that she would not allow the Pendletons, or Rebecca, or anyone or anything else to spoil the beauty of her day. It was her day, after all, hers and Eugene's. She would not allow a single soul to taint her happiness – not when she was wearing a dress that made her feel as elegant as a duchess. A duchess who would soon be feverishly ill if she was not careful. She would do nearly anything to impress Eugene.

“Yes,” she said softly to herself, “Eugene is worth any price that I must pay, even if I shall freeze to death or ruin my only pair of shoes! I shall die quite satisfied to imagine myself loved by a man such as him.”

Thinking of Eugene warmed her, but she could feel her own restlessness growing. Why could the wagon not go any faster, she

wondered. But she was grateful to have a ride into town; it was a fortunate occurrence that Mr. Landry, a tenant on the Pendletons' estate, was going to the village on an errand. Unfortunately, Mr. Landry did not seem to be in any hurry to arrive at Mersey Chapel. The snow and the overcast sky did nothing to move him along any faster. She supposed that she should be content to be seated for this journey, considering the rather lengthy and frigid walk back to Pendleton Hall that awaited her that afternoon.

She could already smell the aroma of the woodsmoke that rose up into the winter sky, curling up from the chimneys above the little cottages of the villagers. In Mersey Chapel, she would be with her own people. There would be no one trying to appear grander than they were, as the Pendletons often did. There was no lace, no gilt teacups, not among the merchants and common tradesmen, not among the common men and women she had known all her life. Certainly not at her father's house or his blacksmithing shop. There, she knew she would be treated with respect, not as a lowly maid. Sighing, she could feel her heart swelling with anticipation. She was nearly home.

"Mersey Chapel, Miss," Mr. Landry called out over his shoulder as they turned onto the rutted dirt lane that became High Street.

Abby was home. There were familiar voices sounding along the street, the clip-clop of horses' hooves, and a distant clanging sound she knew very well. Her father, the village smithy, was at his shop – and Eugene was to be found in his service, she was certain of it. As the wagon slowed and then rolled to a stop, she leaped out, her basket in her grip. The sudden change from riding to standing nearly caused her to lose her balance but she soon recovered. With a swift word of gratitude to Mr. Landry, she was off as quick as a rabbit, bounding towards her father's shop.

The clanging of hot metal being hammered on an anvil grew louder as she passed people with a quick nod of greeting. She did not wish to seem impolite, but she was in a desperate hurry to see Eugene, to stand in her father's shop and feel the heat from the forge, to smell the strangely pleasing acrid scent of hot metal. It was a smell she associated with Eugene, her father's apprentice and the man she would soon marry.

Willing her feet to go faster, she rushed as quickly as she dared over the icy lane, careful of the hem of her skirt. Voices called out greetings, making her feel as though she had returned from a very

long journey. In a way she supposed she had; she had not been home since the autumn, even though Pendleton Hall was not so far away.

Turning the corner at the end of High Street, she passed the baker's shop and the milliner. She did have a few coins in her pocket – coins which she planned to spend, but not yet. There may be time for a few trinkets before she left Mersey Chapel. First, she longed to see Eugene, to feel his arms around her, his breath on her cheek even though she knew he should not be permitted to hold her, or kiss her, a most indecent though that was shocking in the utmost – but not so terrible when she thought of their impending marriage.

The clanging of the blacksmith's hammer grew louder and the sounds from High Street began to fade as she approached her father's shop and the narrow, thatched-roof house that brought tears of nostalgia to her eyes, seeing it after so long. This was her home; this was where she belonged. If Eugene asked her to be his wife she would be married by Easter. She was sure of it. He only needed to ask. Surely he meant to, what other reason could there be for his attention and his compliments? He loved her as she loved him, perhaps this would be the day that he pledged himself to her.

A grizzled old man with arms of steel and a long gray beard looked up from his work at the anvil and smiled widely at Abby. With his hammer and tongs soon abandoned on the anvil, he strode towards her. "Abby? Is that you, my girl?"

"It is, Father, it is!" Abby called out as she rushed to embrace him, enjoying the feeling of being a little girl once again as she fell into the hug of the man who had raised her, of the only parent she had known since her own dear mother died when she was just a little girl.

"This is a fine surprise! I was looking for you at Christmas, but today is just as well," he exclaimed.

"I am here, all of the day if I wish it."

"Then I shall close the shop early and we shall have a feast. A meager one, but a feast, never you fear," he said as he grinned.

"Mrs. Henry sent you a hamper filled with mince pies," Abby replied as she peered past her father into the gloom of the shop. Her eyes were searching for the face she had dreamed about for weeks, the devilishly handsome young man who had stolen her heart away as casually as he brushed his own dark locks back with his hand, a

gesture she found adorable.

“Where is Eugene?” she asked.

“There he is, see him in the smoke?” Mr. Greene gestured into the darkness of the shop. “Have your eyes grown weak at that Hall? Are you unable to see as you once did?”

Once her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the shop, Abby saw Eugene emerging into the weak light of the winter day. He was as handsome as she recalled, his brown eyes shining as they met hers, his hand reaching to his thick dark hair.

“Look who it is, it’s Miss Greene herself come to see us,” replied Eugene.

It required every ounce of her strength not to run into his arms at that very moment. She longed to feel Eugene kissing her lips (instead of just her cheeks), to melt into the bliss of his embrace, as safe and secure as though she belonged there. But a glance to her father kept her from rushing towards the man she adored. Her father liked Eugene, he always had, but he was not one to tolerate any youthful silliness around him, not romantic, and not involving her. Abby knew that, which is why she and Eugene had always kept their mutual adoration hidden from her father. As Eugene had explained it, he did not wish to anger his master, not until he found the proper time to ask for her hand in marriage. Abby thrilled at the prospect that maybe he had done that, just as he promised. Her father could not say no, not anymore, not when Eugene was responsible for so much more in the forge these days.

“Eugene, finish your task. We shall not waste another moment working on this day. Abby is here now. We shall feast and make merry, just as merry as Christmas day!” Mr. Greene said.

“I’ll be as quick as silver.” Eugene’s eyes met hers, locking into a gaze that sent shivers of anticipation up her spine. She blushed and bit her lip.

With a smile and a secret wink in her direction, Eugene turned on his heel and returned to the shop. Abby walked with her father to the cottage, her heart as light as a feather that the falling snow could not keep from soaring into the sky. She was home, Eugene was happy to see her, and all was as she imagined. A proposal would come from him that very day, she felt sure of it as she opened the door of the house she had known since her childhood, delighting in the world of her youth and her future.

By Easter she would be a bride, by summer she would have her

own house. Her husband would be at her side, and her father not far away. Her life would be as perfect as any in the village. It was a dream she held as dear to her heart as her love for Eugene. She held him in the highest regard one could. How dear he was, and soon he would be her husband.

She was so happy that she could not imagine being otherwise; it was simply inconceivable that she should ever be sad. Not when she had her life ahead of her, a life without the Pendletons and their sort. No, she had no interest in the upper class and their endless comings and goings, not when she knew where she belonged. She was to be the wife of a blacksmith, the daughter of one, and she was content to dream of that life. It was a life she wished for with every breath and every beat of her heart. As soon as Eugene proposed to her, when her father gave his blessing, then all would be well, and she would never concern herself with people like the Pendletons ever again.



* * *

Pendleton Hall
Spring, 1813

The view from the top of the hill was magnificent in its bucolic beauty. Tender green leaves sprouted from the branches of the trees that lined the lane and the weeds along the edges of the fields, where thickets and forests still claimed the land. Butterflies began to make their seasonal show of yellow, blue, white – indeed, every color of the rainbow – as they flew in a slow, lazy dance among the blossoms that sprouted out from bushes and along paths and hedgerows. Birds sang, the breeze was warm and smelled of every sweet scent: honeysuckle, jasmine, and rose.

Spring had arrived at Pendleton Hall. The nice weather was here at last and Abby's spirits rose. She felt as alive and renewed as the crops in the fields, as the wheat and the barley and the herbs in the kitchen gardens that grew around every cottage door. She loved this

time of year. The whole valley was awash in the loveliness of the season. This year, it seemed to her that nature and the world around her shared her joy. Soon, she was going to be a wife. She knew it; she could feel it. It must be so because she could not imagine it otherwise.

It was not just her imagination that had her thinking thoughts and dreaming dreams that had filled young girls' heads for thousands of years before her. It was the way Eugene had looked at her when they could steal a minute alone at Christmas, the things he had dared to say, the promises he'd made – or that he would have made, had her father not interrupted them.

Her father had left her and Eugene alone for a few minutes, and they had a hurried reunion filled with a rush of words and sentiments after so many weeks apart. As little as she cared to dwell on it, the uneasy truth remained: Eugene had not said the right words. He had not assured her that he had spoken to her father, despite all his promises. He would – she knew he would do it. He had *promised* her, had he not? Or maybe she'd only thought he had; she could not be sure.

The dress, her eyes, the soft sheen of her hair – all those things he had noticed. He caressed her cheek and her hand, and she was almost sure he had promised. He'd professed that she was the loveliest girl in the village and that he would have no one else for his wife. That was the same as a promise, as a proposal, was it not?

Pegging the sheets upon the line, she was sure of it. Why else would he be so forward? There could be only one answer: he must adore her. That must account for it. She was going to be his wife. When, she did not know, but he must have meant soon. He had to.

Unfortunately, not a word was mentioned at Christmas – or at the brief visit she had managed in February, when she accompanied the missus and her daughters to the village on a shopping trip. Normally, it was Rebecca who had the privilege of going to Mersey Chapel with the family, but Rebecca had relapsed into her mysterious illness, and Abby went to Mersey Chapel. On that cold day, she had seen Eugene for all too brief a time. She remembered how he'd greeted her; the warmth of his welcome was as evident as his surprise at her unexpected arrival. She savored how easily he was overcome with joy that she had come to see him. But even then, he had not spoken any more about their future. A quick peck on the cheek and a few compliments were all that could be

managed.

She pegged the last of the bedclothes on the crowded laundry line, her mind drifting from that memory as she stopped and looked out over the valley. It was a beautiful day; the world was coming alive, and she was going to be married.

With the laundry basket in her hand, she made her way back to the house. Rebecca was in brighter spirits these days; there had been no relapse since February. With Rebecca once again in good health, the job of waiting on the Pendleton ladies fell to her, which did not bother Abby in the least. She wanted to speak to Mrs. Henry in private. Ordinarily, Abby was not the sort of girl who sought advice. Her life was as straight and narrow as the nails her father made in his shop, and there was no uncertainty, no questions that needed answers. But now she felt drawn to the one person she could trust at Pendleton Hall. She needed to talk about the nagging, persistent thought in the back of her mind that all was not as well as she would have wished. She could ignore it no longer.

Five minutes later she was standing in the kitchen, a large knife in her hand, chopping onions and carrots for the servants' stew pot while Mrs. Henry bustled about the kitchen preparing luncheon for the family.

"Luncheon, have you ever heard of such nonsense? Luncheon, I ask you! Why have luncheon when I serve a proper tea at eleven and another one at four. The missus and her fashionable ideas. Where does she get them from, I ask you? This family does not go to London as proper families do, they haven't the money. But luncheon they want, and for what? The very idea."

Abby waited for the old woman to take a breath.

"I ask you, Abby. You have a good head on your shoulders. Why waste the food for luncheon when they can barely afford to feed the rest of us? We'll be lucky they don't have us on stale crusts and water before the summer," Mrs. Henry continued. "It's all just making more work for me, and I'm already in need of a kitchen maid – no slight on you, Abby, you help when you can – but I need a girl in this kitchen and the missis won't pay for one. She can't, to tell you the truth. She can barely pay for her stockings and the clothes on her back!"

Abby blushed and giggled at the shocking mention of the word *stockings*, but she and Mrs. Henry were alone with no men about.

"Mrs. Henry, you are in a tizzy. I am here to help you when I

can.” Abby chopped a turnip with a satisfying whack of the knife.

“Abby, my dear girl, you are a treasure. Never you mind about me. The missus is a bit soft in the head if you ask me. Luncheon, who are we cooking luncheon for? Her and her uppity daughters? Grand, they are indeed! If they were so grand, they would be off to London like the other respectable families in the county!”

“I’m glad they do not want to go to London; I would not like it. I have heard it is dirty and crowded. Give me the quiet of the village, the lanes, and the fields any day,” Abby mused, her troubles temporarily forgotten as she reflected on the breathtaking scene of rural beauty she had viewed not more than a few minutes ago.

“My dear girl, you mark my words, you are a dear. Not like that other one, whose head is filled with starry-eyed dreams and wants to be here and there, and not see to her work. Fine one she is, that Rebecca. I would be glad to be rid of her but the missus dotes on her, and the young ladies adore her.”

Breathing a deep sigh, Abby knew that now was her chance. She was not in the habit of asking anyone for help. Why should she; her life was as predictable and comfortable as the seasons that came in succession. She knew who she was and her place in the world. Unlike Rebecca, who often shared her ambitions for better things and a life of romance and riches, Abby did not want anything at all except to live in Mersey Chapel alongside people she had known all of her days. She wanted Eugene for a husband and she would have him, she just knew it.

Or maybe she didn’t know it anymore. For all his talk about making her his wife, he had not done very much to make those words more than that: just words.

Sighing again, Abby caught Mrs. Henry’s eye.

“What is this? You seem troubled, all of a sudden. Was I too rash? Should I have held my tongue about the missus and that maid she spoils?”

“What care do I have for Rebecca or the missus?” Abby responded with a shrug.

“There, that’s as I thought. You are far too sensible to bother with them. You must be overworked, poor lamb. The way they send you running about, doing all the hard work, makes me fret something terrible.”

“Mrs. Henry,” Abby began haltingly, “There is something I want to ask you about. I know I shouldn’t bother you, not when you have

so much to do, with the tea, and the luncheon, and dinner.”

“What is it, my girl? I may not know the answer, but I can listen.” The woman stood with her hands on her narrow hips, a soup spoon dripping bits of stew onto the floor.

Abby hesitated, wishing she had not mentioned wanting to ask the woman anything at all. What if Mrs. Henry laughed at her, or told the other servants about her worries? That would trouble her, but she needed advice and Mrs. Henry was the closest person she had to a mother.

“If it’s not too much trouble, I want to ask you about my Eugene. I know you don’t know him, why should you, but I have been rather worried about him,” explained Abby, realizing that her voice was becoming choked with emotion as she said aloud what she was thinking. “You see, we were supposed to be married by Easter, but that day has come and gone, and I am no more a bride than I was before.”

Mrs. Henry stared at her. Abby could feel the woman scrutinizing her as if she was a turkey or a joint of ham waiting to be cooked. Flushing, she resumed her chopping and acted as though she hadn’t spoken at all.

“The turnips are chopped, is there anything else you wish me to do before I continue with my chores?”

“Dash the turnips, they can wait. Abby, I thought, as I am sure others did as well, that you were already engaged to be married. I half expected you would give your notice before Candlemas.”

Before she could stop herself, the words and fears overflowed. “I thought so, I truly did. I was sure of it; I suppose I still am. Eugene wants to marry me; he said so. He promised!”

“Did he? Did he promise?” Mrs. Henry asked tenderly.

“He did, or maybe I *thought* he did. I know he said he wants me for his wife, and that he would have no other. That’s as good as a proposal, isn’t it?” Abby asked, her need for reassurance growing with every passing minute.

“Has he asked for your hand? Has he spoken to your father on your behalf?”

Abby did not want to answer those questions. Tears sprang to her eyes as she shook her head, her voice barely a whisper. “No, Mrs. Henry, he has not asked my father. It has been two years, and still he has not asked for me.”

“He’s an apprentice for your father? Perhaps that is the reason

he has not asked for you yet.”

“Perhaps, but why should my father say no? Eugene makes me happy and my father seems to like him as well. He is a good, strong man; he works hard and my father has no complaints about him. Why should there be an objection? Why does Eugene wait if he loves me?”

“If only I knew the answer to that question. Cheer up, my dear. You may be a bride before much longer. When he has finished his apprenticeship, he may ask for your hand quick as you please. You must be patient and give him a chance.”

“Patient? I’ve been patient. I’ve been patient for so long. Why can we not be married? I have some money saved from my wages, and my father will surely make Eugene a partner. Everything could be settled very nicely, if Eugene would only ask for me.”

“Maybe he will. You must not fret about it. You are a sensible girl, and I know that you would not give away your heart to just any man. Not like that Rebecca – that girl will end up badly, mark my words. The way she flirts with this one and that. I shouldn’t say this, but I have heard that she flirts with the young masters here in this very house. It’s scandalous, I tell you!”

“Mrs. Henry, I shall be patient with Eugene.”

“Good, you do that. He may be as sensible as you. I do not know the young man, but he may be waiting until he is no longer an apprentice. That would be the smart thing to do, in my opinion. No sense in getting married until he has the means to support you. That is very sensible thinking, I say it is. Now, don’t you fret about it another minute.” Mrs. Henry smiled at Abby.

Abby was feeling better, her burden lightened. A moment later, Rebecca came sweeping into the kitchen, the tray from the mistress’s tea in her hands and a curious grin on her face. “My, my, what a sweet scene I have found. You town ladies twittering away like magpies. Is there news, a bit of gossip to be shared?”

Abby was grateful that Rebecca had not heard any of the previous conversation. At least, she desperately hoped she had not. It would never do to think that Rebecca knew any more about her life than she already did. Was it not jealousy for Abby and Eugene’s happiness that sent Rebecca into weeks of illness, an ailment impossible to prove?

“You’re in a rare mood, Rebecca. I see your health has made a turn for the better.” Mrs. Henry peered at Rebecca with a spiteful

gleam in her eye.

Rebecca was a buxom, plain girl whose features were as unremarkable as her dull brown hair and her dark eyes, and she was a little dim-witted as well. No, Rebecca was not attractive, nor did her high-pitched voice do her any credit. Abby was at a loss to explain why she was such a favorite with the mistress, but it could be because Rebecca was so much like the mistress and her daughters. She would never outshine them.

Today, Rebecca's eyes were sparkling, and there was color in her cheeks, giving her a glow of health that was not normally present.

"I feel better than I ever have before. It must be the fine spring weather. Surely that is it, is it not, Abby? This beautiful weather. Have you been outside, to the village? Even Mersey Chapel looks better these days, so unlike itself, a boring little village in the middle of the nothing."

Abby bristled at the insult to her village, but then she recalled that Rebecca thought herself better than the present company and the inhabitants of Mersey Chapel. "Perhaps you should seek a position far away, if you do not like the county. I daresay the winter weather does not agree with your delicate constitution. You spent the better part of it in bed."

Mrs. Henry chortled as Rebecca's face reddened in indignation. Abby smiled. She was glad she'd spoken with Mrs. Henry; the conversation had left her feeling better about Eugene and the wait for his proposal. Today, even Rebecca would not bother her. She would give as good as she got from the other maid.

"You, who are so smug, what do you know? Your father is just a smithy and you will always be a maid. I hope you are content with that lot, because you can do no better!" Rebecca slammed the tea tray on the table before turning on her heel and leaving the kitchen in a huff.

"That is where you are wrong, Rebecca. I will not always be a maid, just you wait!" Abby called out to the back of the other girl, but Rebecca did not turn around.

"The very cheek of her, it's her that will be a maid for the rest of her life – if she's lucky not to get into trouble. Her sort always do – you'll see. You, my dear, you will be a wife before you know it."

Abby smiled at the cook, buoyed by her words. She hoped that that old woman was right. Mrs. Henry had lived many years, she must be right about the world, about men. Abby depended on it.

With the triumph of having the last word after Rebecca's insult, she smiled as she slid the chopped vegetables into the stew pot. She felt very pleased. She was going to be a bride, there was no question about it. She needed only to be patient and all would be well. With a little more time, she would have a sum saved so that she may ask Eugene to hurry his plans along. She could even speak to her father if Eugene was apprehensive.

Like the spark from a fire dancing up with a snap, she suddenly had an idea that was so profound and powerful that she grinned. Mrs. Henry was right; Eugene was waiting to ask her father until he could support them both. That must be the truth – why else would he keep saying that he wanted her for his wife, and yet he did nothing about it? He must be embarrassed, praying that she would not lose hope. Had he forgotten that she was working, and saving every penny? Indeed, she had enough money for them both, at least for a little while. There was no need to wait. She would remind Eugene that she had some money, nearly every bit she'd earned, saved up from her work as a maid. Surely, he would see that there was no reason to delay their happy plans any longer.

With this new idea bubbling inside her head, she was sure that she would not be a maid much longer. Rebecca was wrong, and Abby could not wait for the moment when she told her just how wrong she truly was.

Chapter Two

“Abby, we can’t be married. Not now, anyway,” Eugene said, looking nervously over her shoulder and out into the yard of her father’s blacksmith shop.

Abby felt her heart pounding uncontrollably as she stood, stunned. The heat from the forge and from the warm, late spring day and her frantic walk to Mersey Chapel had taken its toll on her. She felt faint and frail and weak, but she had been so excited that she had not noticed any of those things until this moment. Eugene stared at her as though she was proposing they run away to the West Indies. He dropped his tongs into a pail of water and wiped his dirty hands on his leather apron.

“Your father will be back any moment; we cannot have this conversation here. Not now,” he said, clearly exasperated.

Abby rallied, despite the sudden feeling of terror that swelled inside her. Perhaps he had not heard her. “Eugene, were you not listening? I have the money that we need to marry. I have more than enough. We can pay the rent on a little cottage, and you can work here with father. When we are married, surely he will share the money he makes from the forge. He has no son to leave the shop to, and I am a woman. He must make you his heir to the business. I know that it’s not much, but isn’t that what you’ve worked for, to become a blacksmith, to have your own shop one day? Why not have this one?”

“Have you not heard me? I can’t marry you. I have another year to work as his apprentice. I have served him for six years; one more is all that I require. One more year, and then I may do as I wish. He can throw me into the street if I displease him before then. Where would I be if that should happen? What shall I do?” Eugene said desperately.

“I thought you wanted to marry me; I thought you said so. Why would you have promised me that you wanted to wed me, when you planned to wait for another year? Could you not have told me so?”

“I thought you were a smart girl,” he replied dismissively.

She gasped and reached for his arm.

“Eugene, you never said that we should wait. How was I to know that was what you intended? The way you hold me, the kisses, the things you said. I was sure we would be married by Easter.”

He snorted. “By Easter? Whatever gave you that idea? Did I say by Easter, did I give you any reason to plan such foolish schemes?”

“Foolish? You’re calling me foolish? I thought you loved me!” she cried out as tears stung her eyes, pooling up and slipping from the corners down her cheeks.

He sighed and stood before her as he had done so many times. This time he did not reach for her; he did not pull her close as he might have on any other day. He looked down at her, and his words were flat and cold. “You have filled your head with some fanciful story that I cannot account for. When did I ever say we were to be wed? By Christmas? By Easter, by Michaelmas? No, I have not declared it. You have no reason to suspect that my intentions towards you were anything but kindness and respect towards the daughter of my master.”

“Eugene, that is not true, not one word of it is! You told me countless times that you would have no other woman for your wife. You said that I was the prettiest girl in the village, and that you liked this dress,” she exclaimed, her voice cracking on the words. She was so embarrassed that she admitted to remembering such a tiny, silly detail as she gestured weakly to the blue dress, made grimy at the hem by the five-mile walk to the village that morning.

He looked sympathetic. “You imagined a proposal from that? You have cobbled together a romantic tale from a few niceties and pleasantries exchanged between us.”

“You did things to make me think you cared for me, as well. You hugged me, you kissed me, you caressed my face,” she said as her hand fluttered to her cheek as she remembered the feeling of his rough hands on her skin.

“Did I?” he asked, his question sounding very much like an accusation.

“You did. You know it, and so do I. Perhaps my father will want to hear of this,” she said, sounding like a child to her own ears. Why should her father care for her mistakes and the pain that Eugene claimed she had brought upon herself?

Eugene peered at her very hard, and she felt every happy dream

of their future life together slipping away, leaving her forever. She knew he had wanted to marry her – she'd felt it. How could she have been so terribly wrong?

With a suddenness she was not expecting, he smiled at her. All traces of his stern expression disappeared as quickly as the dreams she'd had for their future. He reached for her hand, apologizing, "Abby, forgive me. Please forget all that I said. I was only taken aback."

"What?" she whispered, as she looked down at her hand in his. She should pull it free from his grasp, but she could not bring herself to do so. This was the Eugene she remembered, not the sour-faced one who had called her foolish. This man who was smiling at her, his eyes soft and filled with emotion, was the one she knew and adored.

"You caught me unaware – by complete surprise – is all. It's only that...well, it won't do to be using your money. It's insulting, really, to suggest that I can't take care of you, and you'll have to support us yourself. But I misspoke, and I hope you'll forgive me. I was vexed, and I apologize."

Abby grasped his hand and the reassurance he offered as readily and gratefully as if she was reaching out to be saved from a rushing flood. Nodding in confusion and the return of the dreams that had been abandoning her, she replied, "I'm sorry, Eugene. I never thought."

"You should have considered my feelings," he said, but his voice was gentler now. "To walk in here and tell me – oh, but anyway." He squeezed her fingers and let her hand drop. "I hope you are keeping your money safe. In a box somewhere, far away from the other servants? You must be careful, you know that. You must see to it that only you and I know where the money may be found."

"Oh, yes, of course. It's in a tin under the floorboard near my bed. No one knows it's there; it's safe."

"It will help. Once we are married, you may use your money to buy things for our home."

"Then you will speak to Father? Or should I? I can tell him, if you like. He may like to hear it from me better," she replied, her happiness returning.

"No, that would not be proper. I should be the one to ask, and I shall. You have my word. Before the summer is ended, we shall be engaged. Promise me that you shall keep our secret until then. Your

father should hear about this from me.”

Abby nodded. “Yes, you are right. I don’t know what I was thinking; I was being impatient. Mrs. Henry, the cook, says I should be patient. I should have listened to her and not come here today. I’ve upset you.”

He gave her a small smile. “You caught me by surprise, that’s all. Let’s forget all about it. Your father will be returning soon; we cannot have him seeing you crying, can we? What will he think?”

Pulling her hand from his, she wiped the tears from her face and looked into his eyes, seeking his assurance. “Then you are truly proposing, you intend to marry me? There can be no question?”

“There is no need to question it, or question *us*. You and I will be engaged before the summer is ended. You must believe me, say that you do,” he said earnestly.

“I believe you,” she answered, and she did. She clung to the assurance and dismissed all that had happened before. She should not have upset him, that was all. But he had forgiven her.

“Good, good,” he replied. He kissed her hand again, smiling at her in a way that made her heart leap with joy. “Before the summer’s end, we shall be promised, and then we’ll marry as soon as my apprenticeship ends in the spring. You may rely on it.”



* * *

“Girl, you are useless. It’s a wonder that I have engaged you as a servant as long as I have!” Mrs. Pendleton spoke sharply to Abby as she rushed to clear away the pile of dresses that littered the bed and the floor.

“If Rebecca were here, she would know precisely which dress I wished to have pressed and mended for dinner. Really, you are a dreadful disappointment. I would do without a maid at all, if I thought I would never find one better than you,” the woman continued her attack from her cushioned stool, where she was seated in front of her dressing table.

Abby would have loved to be far away from the mistress of the

house, her collection of gaudy dresses, and her cruel insults, but she could not afford to lose her position. Not when she wanted to save every penny she could. Engaged by summer's end. Soon she would have a home of her own, a two-room cottage, perhaps. A cozy little place to call her own. She would clean and cook and do as she wished and never be bothered with the likes of Mrs. Pendleton ever again. But, she thought as she filled her arms with cheaply made gowns, she must endure a few more weeks of this abuse and drudgery. It was a worthy sacrifice that she would forget as soon as she had taken her marriage vows.

"Have you been listening? I said I wanted to wear the red gown. Honestly, girl, you are soft. Rebecca would know what I needed!"

Abby wished with all her heart that Rebecca had not taken ill once again. If Rebecca was here, Abby could be doing any one of the dozens of other chores she preferred to helping the missus, who had been known to box her ears on occasion, or even scratch her. She kept her distance from the vile woman.

"Yes, mum," Abby said, dumping the dresses back on the bed and frantically searching for the red one. There were three, all of a similar garish hue – and all ugly. In fact, all of these dresses offended Abby's plain sensibilities. She preferred more subdued colors, far less lace, and fewer beads.

"You are irksome, do you know that? I said the red one!"

Abby held up a dress that she was sure was red, and waited for her mistress's approval.

"Does that look red to you? You ignorant peasant! That gown is quite clearly crimson!" Without any warning, her mistress leaped from her padded stool and closed the gap between them, snatching the gown from Abby's grasp. "Do you know anything at all? No, you don't, which is why you will never be my maid. I daresay you are fortunate to remain in the kitchen!"

Abby stood motionless, not daring to respond. She could smell the Madeira on her mistress's breath, and it mingled unpleasantly with the scent of sweat from the corpulent woman.

"This one, you dolt! Press it at once! Now get out of my sight!" The woman shoved a dress at her, pushing her as she did. "I don't care how sick Rebecca is, you send her to me. I do not want to see your face again this evening, do you hear me?"

Abby nodded emphatically. She did not want to see her mistress any more than her mistress wanted to see her; the feeling was

completely and totally mutual. As she raced out of the room, relieved that her ears were not ringing from being boxed, she thought of her money. Surely she had enough saved to put an end to this? Did she really need any more? Yes, she decided as she rushed upstairs to her quarters, every extra penny she made would be helpful when they were furnishing the cottage of her dreams.

Running up the servants' stairs, the red dress in her arms, she smiled a little. Rebecca would have to work, after all. It did not matter how much she wished to play at being ill and shirk her duties, the mistress would spare no mercy for her favorite maid.

She had never understood why the mistress loved Rebecca and loathed her, or why she had not been replaced. Perhaps it was as old Mrs. Henry had said: that she reminded the missus and her brood that even a poor village girl was prettier and carried herself with more grace than they did. Abby doubted it, preferring not to indulge in such vanity, but she wondered now if there *was* something about her that made the mistress angry. Something that kept her employed, but not paid very well. Perhaps it was only that no one else was foolish enough to work for the Pendletons. She certainly knew of no girl in the village who envied her position, no one who wanted to take her place.

"Rebecca, get dressed, the mistress wants you at once!" Abby called out cheerfully as she burst into the attic room she shared with the other maid. She was glad to be banished back to the kitchen, and more than happy to play the role of the messenger to Rebecca and convey that her services were being demanded by Mrs. Pendleton. "Rebecca, you must be in good health, you are needed!"

A dove swept past her as she thrust open the door of the room. The bird, which had been roosting in the relatively cool shade of the attic, was one of several that made its home there, along with Rebecca and Abby. With so many holes in the roof, it was a wonder that there were not more birds living among them, thought Abby as she dismissed the brief fright and stared into the room.

Rays of light from the narrow window illuminated the dust that flew in the air from the dove's sudden flight. The sunlight illuminated the tiny cots, the thin blankets – and the tin that was left open on Rebecca's bed. An empty tin on Rebecca's empty bed.

For a moment, Abby did not react as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Rebecca was not where she should be; her bed was made. On the coverlet lay an empty tin – the very tin that

usually held Abby's wages. Gasping, Abby dropped the red gown onto the dusty floor, not caring how filthy it would become. She rushed towards the cot, reaching for the tin. Holding it up, she peered inside it, and frantically shook it. Willing her money to be inside, she could not comprehend for a moment that it was gone. Gone!

"It can't be gone; it can't!" she cried, dropping the metal container on the floor and plopping down beside it. Her knees hit the wooden planks hard, but she barely noticed the pain. She stared at the lifted floorboard, the hollow space beneath it now completely empty.

How could Rebecca have known about her money? Abby had tried not to be seen when she deposited her money into the tea tin. How foolish she had been to think that all her care, making sure that she was alone when she hid her wages, had done any good. *Two years* of pay, saved...and vanished. It was too dreadful to consider, but consider it she must. She knew Rebecca was a liar and prone to dramatic displays of a false illness – and now Abby knew she was a thief, as well.

Her mistress's garish red gown quite forgotten, she trampled it underfoot as she ran from the room. She would find Rebecca and demand that she return the money. There could be no other way, Abby resolved as she raced down the stairs, her jaw clenched in growing anger, her mind racing as quickly as she moved. As she went, she heard the most unimaginable wailing sound emanating from deep inside the house. There were screams, and then a loud banging sound as though something was being dashed to pieces. The sounds were so startling that Abby froze on the stairs.

"Where are they? Where are my necklaces, my jewels?" Several more loud bangs followed.

Stunned, she sat where she was on the steps, listening. The mistress was in a rage, and it seemed Abby wasn't the only one missing valuables.

"Everything is gone, all of my rings, everything!" she heard the woman's voice growing louder. "I'll have whoever did this hung until dead! The nerve!"

Abby raced down to the kitchen, where she was met at the door by Mrs. Henry, who looked aghast. "Good heavens, what is all that about? Did you ruin a dress, or burn her hair with the curling tongs? Why is she wailing like a banshee?"

Abby shook her head. "Nothing at all like that. Where's Rebecca? I must find her this minute."

"Rebecca? Why would you care about that girl? Is she not in the attic playing at being ill?" Upstairs, the dreadful cacophony of noise moved into the room directly above them. "The missus is in a fine state! I don't know what has happened, but she sounds like she's being murdered."

Abby's breath rushed from her body, as her chest heaved in frustration, "The mistress can do what she likes; I must find Rebecca this instant. It cannot wait!"

Mrs. Henry stared at the ceiling of the kitchen as the loud banging continued, now accompanied by more screams. Finally, her eyes settled on Abby. "Oh dear, what has happened?"

"Rebecca is gone and so is my money, and the mistress's jewelry, by the sound of it. I need to find her, she has two years of my wages, *two years*! Without it, I cannot be married!" Abby cried.

"Bless me! Well, she hasn't come through here."

"Where can she be? I saw her this morning; she was laying in her bed, moaning and tossing about in a great show of being ill. Now she is gone. Someone must know something, perhaps Mrs. Patrick?"

As though summoned, the housekeeper came running down the stairs, her face red, her chest heaving from the exertion. She stood doubled over, gulping for air as she reached for Abby's arm, "Where are they? Why have you taken your mistress's jewels, you ungrateful wretch?"

Abby stood in shock as Mrs. Patrick tightened her grip on her arm, her fingernails like talons digging into her flesh.

"I haven't taken anything; I am the one who has been robbed. My wages have gone missing. Two years of my savings!" Abby hissed as she wrenched her arm from the housekeeper's grip.

"Don't lie to me, girl. The missus knows that you have stolen from her. Do you hear me? The magistrate is to be summoned at once. It would go far easier on you if you confessed now and told me where you have hidden her jewelry."

Mrs. Henry stepped in between Mrs. Patrick and Abby, staring at the housekeeper with a look that could have stopped a charging bull.

"Don't be daft! She is not the one you want, you foolish woman. It's that Rebecca you go on about so much. She's the one who has

stolen the missus's jewelry and poor Abby's wages. I fear Abby's wages are worth more than anything in the missus's jewelry box; the whole lot is made of water and paste if you ask me, hardly worth summoning the magistrate for!"

"The missus insists that it was Abby," Mrs. Patrick remarked, seething.

"The missus is wrong. I'll stand for Abby's character. If you had any sense, you would be looking for Rebecca. She's probably halfway to London by now, her purse filled with money and what she thinks is gold."

"It can't be her," Mrs. Patrick said, but she sounded less than sure.

"It must be, she's missing along with everything else!" Mrs. Henry said.

"Oh, good heavens," Mrs. Patrick remarked, looking pale as a ghost. "Saints preserve us, there will be hell to pay now."

If Abby couldn't find Rebecca, she would not be getting married in the spring; they would have to wait and save more money for the things they needed. That might take another year. With a sudden burst of energy and a desperate need to be alone, she ran from the kitchen and out to the garden, tears of frustration falling down her cheeks. Her dreams were slipping away; they were gone like Rebecca. With a wail she crumpled onto the grass, fainting as her mistress broke a vase and the household was turned upside down, to no avail.

Rebecca was gone.



* * *

After a while, Mrs. Henry came and helped Abby sit up. Wiping her eyes, she listened to the other woman's soothing chatter, though it sounded like it was coming to her from a long way away. She was dazed, and still could not accept the horrible truth. Her money, and her future, were gone.

"Abby, my girl," Mrs. Henry said, "The magistrate will be here

soon, and you must speak with him.”

Shaking her head, as she tried to clear the fuzziness from her thinking. “I don’t want to speak to him, or anyone. I want my money back. I have to have it; don’t you see that?”

“You cannot be worried about your money right now; it’s the missus and her paste and glass jewelry you need to answer for.”

“Answer for? Why? I haven’t taken anything,” Abby replied, indignant.

“I know that, and I believe so does Mrs. Patrick, but you know that the missus has never favored you. Talk to the magistrate; tell him the truth. I’ll stand for your character, and so will anyone from the village.”

“I’m the one who’s been robbed, and now I’m to blame? Even though Rebecca is nowhere to be found?”

“It’s the way of things. You are a maid, and the missus can say what she likes. She can point the blame at whoever she wants to,” Mrs. Henry said, pulling Abby to her feet. “But don’t you go worrying about it. The magistrate is Mr. McCreadie. I wager every pound of my wages that he knows your father; he won’t let you take the blame for something that girl Rebecca did. Not a bit, and besides, McCreadie isn’t so fond of the Pendletons anyway. No one is, who has any dealings with them. Dry your tears, wash your face, and make yourself as presentable as you can.”

Abby only shook her head. “I should go after Rebecca. Maybe if I go fetch my father...”

The cook tutted. “Abby, the missus is not going to let you leave the grounds. I know this is a shock, but you must pull yourself together. Do that for me, will you? You must speak with Mr. McCreadie when he comes, and you must make a good impression. You don’t want to go to jail, do you?”

“Why would I steal my own money?” Abby asked.

“I don’t think you would; I know you are a good girl. Never you worry, you come along with me. Mr. McCreadie will set this whole business to rights. Come along, let’s get you presentable.”

Abby was still trying to make sense of everything that had happened as she let Mrs. Henry take her back to the house. As they approached the kitchen door, she realized the entire house had gone mad. The missus was shrieking, and now her daughters were squabbling and yelling along with her from the upper floors. Mrs. Patrick was nowhere to be found, but Mrs. Henry assured Abby that

in the time she had been senseless on the grass, Mrs. Patrick had endured the worst abuse and cruelty from the missus.

A footman rushed down the stairs, stricken and red-faced, and fled out the back door.

“Never you mind about anything the missus has to say,” Mrs. Henry said, stepping neatly out of his way. “The woman won’t pin this trouble on you; not if I have my way.”

Abby was too upset to take comfort in the cook’s words, which she knew were meant to be reassuring. All she could think of was that Rebecca could not be very far away. If she could only be found, then all this would be solved. Could Mr. McCreddie’s time not be put to better use in searching for Rebecca?

After the years of cruelty she’d endured from the Pendletons, she didn’t much care whether the mistress got her jewelry back. A family as odious as the one she served almost deserved dishonest servants and the troubles that came with them, she thought. Scowling, Abby wiped her face with the dampened cloth, grateful for Mrs. Henry’s presence.

As if reading her thoughts, Mrs. Henry wrapped her arms around Abby and pulled her close.

Until that moment, Abby had not known how desperate she was for warmth and comfort. She had never known her own mother. But standing in the kitchen, with the house in chaos high over her head, all of her money gone, and standing accused of thievery, she needed someone at her side. The older woman watched her with empathy. Exhausted and still reeling from the horrible events of the day, Abby crumpled.

“There, there, wipe your face. You’ll soon see there is no need to worry yourself,” Mrs. Henry patted Abby on the back.

“I was going to use that money to buy the things we need for our new home when Eugene and I are married,” she sobbed.

“I told you, you must wipe your eyes and steel yourself. The magistrate will be here soon. We can’t have him seeing you in such a state as this. I wish there was time to make you a cup of tea. That would do you good, steady your nerves. But we mustn’t tarry.”

Mrs. Patrick clamored down the steps. “There you both are, where have you been? I’ve been looking for you. The missus wants to see Abby, and then you, too, Mrs. Henry.”

Mrs. Henry harrumphed. “Why she would wish to see me? I’ll go to the missus – oh yes, I will – but at Abby’s side. I won’t let her

blame this dear girl, not for an instant. The whole lot of these Pendletons can starve, for all I care. Disgraceful family, they have been lucky to have me here cooking for them all these years."

Abby was filled with gratitude for Mrs. Henry's kind words, and for the knowledge that she would not have to face the shrieking missus all alone. It gave her comfort, even though she knew it would not bring back her money. Only Mr. McCreadie could do that. She was certain he would want to help her as soon as she told him of her loss. Yes, she brightened, Mr. McCreadie would find Rebecca and bring her back. Then Abby would have her money and marry Eugene, just as they had planned. Despite the sounds of a prolonged tantrum by the missus and her shrill, ill-tempered brood, Abby's heart swelled in optimism. Surely, dear Mrs. Henry was right and all would be well. It had to be; she could not have spent two years of her life in the tiresome service of Pendletons for nothing.



* * *

"Hold your tongue no matter what anyone says to you, unless it's Mr. McCreadie," Mrs. Henry whispered to Abby as they entered the drawing room.

Mrs. Pendleton was fanning herself at a ferocious pace, and still sweat was seeping through the thin lace gathered around her thick, swollen throat. Her hair stuck to her forehead in the perspiration that glistened on her face. Her color was so high that Abby feared the woman may do herself some real harm during this latest tantrum. An apoplexy, perhaps.

Beside Mrs. Pendleton, who was sprawled in a very unladylike fashion in a chair, were her daughters. Neither of them were as upset as their mother, but they did manage sour expressions and narrowed eyes with viperous looks towards Abby. At least, Abby thought, the screaming and throwing things had concluded. As she stepped onto the threadbare carpet of the drawing room, she felt something shatter under her weight. Looking down, she raised her shoe., she saw the full extent of the damage done by the missus in

her rage.

Spread all over the worn carpet (a relic of a wealthier home now many years worn), were the remains of several vases, a mantle clock, and a broken picture frame. Fine feathers drifted in the air, feathers that Abby could only surmise must have been at one time stuffed inside the tufted pillow cushions that now lay in a heap on the floor.

“Have you ever seen the like of it before? What a proper mess,” Mrs. Henry drew Abby closer to her, her words coming quietly, audible only to Abby. “There must have been quite a row in here.”

Abby nodded in agreement as she tried to make sense of the chaos that surrounded her. This room had been neat and clean just a few hours before. Although it was not a richly furnished room, it was pleasant, its decorations the gaudy kind favored by the Pendletons, who wished to appear richer than they were. This room was meant to convey affluence when there was none. The worn rug underfoot was a testament to that, as was the lack of real Chinese porcelain and other wares that would be indications of true wealth. Abby had used to think it was appointed, but she had overheard the merchants talking in the village. All the villagers gossiped about the Pendletons, remarking about the cheap furnishings in the house, and the enormous debts owed by the family to every tradesman in town.

But rich or not, the Pendletons were still far above her in rank. She could be in real trouble if Mrs. Pendleton convinced the magistrate to arrest her. Shuddering as she stepped over a broken teapot, the dark brown tea staining the rug, Abby prayed that all would be explained and that she would not be blamed for Rebecca’s dishonesty. Not when Rebecca owed her two years of wages.

“There’s the wretch, ungrateful girl!” screeched the missus as she stopped fanning herself long enough to glare at Abby.

“I did not...” Abby began but felt Mrs. Henry’s grip on her arm, a warning, perhaps.

“Mum, I’ve come just as you ordered me to, come with Abby to stand for her character if I must.” Mrs. Henry replied as she stepped in front of Abby, shielding her from the woman they all served.

“If she had committed no grievance against me, then she would have no need for anyone to give her a character. Stand aside, woman, and let her answer for her crimes,” Mrs. Pendleton angrily demanded.

“She has committed no crimes. If you had half a mind you would know that it’s the other girl, that Rebecca, who robbed you and Abby,” Mrs. Henry said without hesitation.

Abby stood still as a stone; her mouth wide open in shock. She had never heard anyone speak to the missus in any way that wasn’t submissive and deferential.

The missus seemed to be just as astonished as she angrily replied, “What impertinence, and from my own cook! I should ask for your resignation this instant!”

“Very well, as you wish – but you won’t find anyone else who will cook for you for the lowly wages you pay me.”

If Abby wasn’t in such a dire situation she would have laughed and applauded Mrs. Henry, but she held her tongue as Mrs. Patrick stepped in to defuse the tension.

“M’um, Mrs. Henry is quite distraught – as we all are – that such a terrible misfortune has fallen upon you. I beg you not to take her in earnest as she does not mean a word of what she says.”

Abby was sure Mrs. Henry had meant every word, but she remained silent as Mrs. Pendleton permitted herself to be pacified by her housekeeper.

“Very well, but I shall not brook another impertinent remark. Not one, am I understood? Here I sit, the victim of a most grievous crime, and I must endure such insults? It is not to be borne, I tell you,” complained Mrs. Pendleton bitterly.

This time it was Abby’s turn to grip Mrs. Henry’s arm, to convey a silent message not to continue. With a sigh and a slump of her shoulders, Mrs. Henry complied.

“What have you to say for yourself? Where is my jewelry?” Mrs. Pendleton returned to her verbal attack on Abby with a swiftness that made Mrs. Patrick jump.

Abby was about to defend herself, ignoring Mrs. Henry’s advice, when the harried footman appeared, his white wig askew.

“The magistrate for you M’um,” the footman said as he valiantly tried to say what must be said without gasping, but his chest heaved with the efforts of the past quarter hour.

Mr. McCreadie strode into the drawing room behind the footman. He was a slight man, short in stature. His gray hair was tied back with a ribbon and his clothes were the sort that had been fashionable two decades prior, but he did not seem as severe as Abby had been expecting – nor did he look pleased to be summoned

to Pendleton Hall.

"This is unacceptable, to be kept waiting as I have been forced to do," Mrs. Pendleton greeted the man with a haranguing best suited for one of her harried servants.

Mr. McCreadie, to his credit, did not take the bait, but stared at the corpulent woman who presided over the disaster of a drawing room as though she was an empress. Abby thought she detected a slight curve of the man's thin lips, as though he was concealing an amused smile, but that glimmer of good nature was soon gone. In its place was as stern an expression as she had ever seen.

"Do forgive me, Mrs. Pendleton. I was detained on urgent matters in the village. I came as soon as could be managed."

"Urgent matters in the village? What insolence. The village means nothing compared to my loss and the prestige of my family that has been besmirched this dark day at Pendleton Hall. I say to you, sir; your conduct will not go with address, but I have need of your services. Arrest this girl at once; she has stolen my jewelry and must account for it. I shall have no satisfaction until my jewels are returned to me and she is driven into the street, her character ruined for this offense!"

Abby's heart began to beat wildly in her chest. Her cheeks burned with indignation but she stood mute. The defense of her own actions that should have poured from her lips did not come. She was unable to speak, the shock of Mrs. Pendleton's attack so severe that she swallowed hard and tried to steady herself.

Mrs. Henry spoke in her stead. "Mr. McCreadie, you know this girl, or shall I say that I presume that you know her father. He is the smithy in the village. I assure you, sir, that her character is as steadfast as his."

Mr. McCreadie turned his attention to Abby, and his face softened as he looked at her with kindness in his dark blue eyes. "Your name is Greene, is that correct?"

Abby nodded and found he voice again. Curtsying, she answered, "Yes, sir."

He nodded. "I see the family resemblance. Take strength, girl. I do know your father. He is a good, honest man, and you have undoubtedly benefited from his example."

"Benefited? How can that be? She is a thief, that dreadful girl. A thief, I tell you!"

Mr. McCreadie answered calmly. "I have no wish to disappoint

you, madam, but on this matter you are mistaken.”

The large woman heaved herself from her chair, pointed at Abby, and continued her merciless attack. “Mistaken? How am I to endure this? She stole my jewels; she is a bold a criminal as I have ever seen.”

“Have you any evidence to produce that Miss Greene is the culprit of this crime?” he replied.

“I ordered my footman to search her room, the house, and the grounds” Mrs. Pendleton spat.

“This man, who I see before me?” he asked.

“Yes, this man here. Tell him, tell him what you have found. Have my jewels have been found in her possession?” The mistress of Pendleton Hall glared at the footman, who looked as though he would like to run away. Instead, he shook his head. “Nothing has been found, no trace of jewelry.”

Mrs. Pendleton gasped, clutching her chest as she accused the footman. “How do I know that I may trust you? You could have schemed with my maid, the nerve of you both. Have I no servant that can be trusted? Where is my Rebecca? She is the only person who has my faith. Where is she when I need her so?”

With a tone that seemed suited to a parent soothing an upset child, Mr. McCreadie spoke directly to the mistress of Pendleton Hall. “Mrs. Pendleton, I suggest that you prepare yourself for some rather unpleasant news. News that I am certain will clear the good names of what remains of your serving staff.”

“Tell it to me then, that I may know the name of the criminal who has robbed me,” Mrs. Pendleton answered as she returned to her chair. She wrapped her fat fingers around the arms of it as though she was preparing to spring forth at any moment like a large and malicious cat.

“This Rebecca that you have spoken so highly of, is the person most likely to have taken your jewels. It is my opinion that she – and not Miss Greene – is in possession of your valuables, neither in concert with your footman or any other servant that you see standing before you.”

Abby could hardly believe her ears. How had the magistrate determined Rebecca’s guilt so quickly? Her unspoken question was soon answered.

“The maid Rebecca is being sought so that her guilt may be fully determined, but I must say that the evidence against her is as strong

circumstantially as any I have been presented, in all my years in this position. She was seen earlier in the day in the village, accompanied by a second person who is sought for a similar crime. They seem to have cooperated to achieve these offenses against you Mrs. Pendleton and one other in the village,” he explained as he glanced towards Abby.

“I don’t believe Rebecca could be capable of such deceit. She adored me and my girls; she positively doted on us all. Of what does she stand accused? What crime could that be? What other offense could compare to the theft of my jewelry collection, valued at many hundreds of pounds?” Mrs. Pendleton replied.

Mrs. Henry snorted at the mention of the value of the Pendleton jewels, but Abby listened intently for the evidence to be presented. Surely this evidence would exonerate her and perhaps answer the most pressing question that she possessed, where was Rebecca to be found and where were her wages?

“It is my sad duty to report that a tradesman in the village has reported that the girl Rebecca was seen at his establishment conversing with his apprentice before they both made a hasty departure. I regret to add that they also absconded with some of the earnings from his trade.”

Rolling her eyes, Mrs., Pendleton snapped, “What care do I have for the miseries of a village tradesman? Where is Rebecca, and if you are so disposed, where are my jewels? I shall not believe that she is capable of such villainy until I have spoken to her myself.”

“Mrs. Pendleton, I assure you that if I knew the whereabouts of your maid and her accomplice I should have arrested them this very morning. As it is, they are both missing. I presume they are making their way to London, Manchester, or Liverpool, perhaps? The roads are being patrolled and so are the inns, where they may change horses or purchase coach fair. Their destination is unknown, but what is known is that together, they are responsible for the theft of your jewelry here at Pendleton Hall, and several weeks’ worth of income at the establishment belonging to Mr. Greene, the village blacksmith at Mersey Chapel.”

Abby was jolted out of her own misery. “What? I beg your pardon, but did you say my father has been the victim of crime?”

She now understood the reason for the kindness she had seen in the magistrate’s eyes. “I did not wish to tell you in such a blunt manner, but it could not be helped. Your father has been robbed.”

“What of Eugene? Was he not there to protect the shop?” Abby asked.

“This may come as a shock to you, Miss Greene, but Eugene is the accomplice of the maid, the very one who stands accused of robbing your mistress Mrs. Pendleton. They are together, from what I have been told by credible witnesses. They have worked in unison to execute this scheme. Eugene is sought for theft, as is Rebecca. I regret that you discovered this unpleasant news in such a manner, but take comfort that your father was not harmed and you are not to be arrested. Your good name shall remain.”

Abby stared at the magistrate for a moment, feeling her heart shatter in her chest. Her vision closed to a single point, and she collapsed.

Later that very day she returned to Mersey Chapel, distraught and penniless. She now saw the world for what it was, and she would never be the same.

Chapter Three

Mersey Chapel, England
Summer, 1813

News of the treacherous maid of Pendleton Hall and her villainous accomplice soon spread through the small hamlet of Mersey Chapel. The villagers rallied around the Greene family, assuring Mr. Greene that his business would not fail. His creditors agreed to be patient, since the loss was not due to any mismanagement on his part. It was universally acknowledged by one and all that Eugene, with his handsome face and charm, had deceived the whole village and his treachery could not have been anticipated.

Mr. Greene would accept no charity. He did what he always did when times were bad, he went to work, doubling his efforts. He quickly hired a new apprentice and started over.

Abby did not rebound from the betrayal as quickly as her resilient father; she hid herself away in her father's cottage. She avoided people when she could, and she filled her days with silence in the company of an orange cat, and contented herself with doing housework and cooking for her father.

The gossip soon found her, and Abby was grateful that nobody knew how she had fallen for Eugene's deception. Still, the loss of her wages had become common knowledge, and she could hardly bear the kindness and pity her neighbors showed her without coming apart. She preferred to cry her tears in private, and not in front of well-meaning villagers. Some understood and left her alone, but others were more tenacious. One of these loyal supporters was Mrs. Tillery, an amiable village matron who had birthed ten children of her own. She had always been like an aunt to Abby, and was not to be denied the duty of providing for Abby and her father now, as was evidenced by her insistent knocking at the door on a summer day in June.

Abby leaned her broom against the hearth and sighed as she made her way across the freshly swept floor. How she wished to be

left alone, but with the shutters of the cottage windows flung open to allow in a cooling breeze, there was no way to pretend she was not in residence.

“Abby, where are you? It’s Mrs. Tillery, from next door!” the woman announced as she knocked on the wooden door yet again.

Taking a moment to tidy her hair and pat her swollen eyes, Abby turned the latch of the door and tried to arrange her features into a pleasant expression.

Mrs. Tillery thrust a basket of pies towards Abby as she burst into the small residence. “Is there tea? I say, my dear, you should have the kettle to boil at all times. Tea would go well with these pies, and your dear father will be in for his dinner soon, the poor man.”

Abby reminded herself that Mrs. Tilley meant well. Eugene and Rebecca’s crime was the most scandalous event to take place in the village for decades. They had not been found, to the delight of the matrons of Mersey Chapel. But for Abby the gossip was too personal, the pain still felt too keenly to be a spectacle worthy of chatter and comment.

“You look so pale; sit by the fireside. I daresay it is rather warm in here. I shall make you a cup of tea and then you shall have a slice of pie. I made a savory one, kidneys and the like, and one sweet for after.”

Abby sat down by the window while her kind neighbor fretted about in the confined space. From outside, she could hear the hammering of metal on metal as her father and his new apprentice, Owen, worked in the heat. Abby was glad that her father seemed to have recovered from the loss of his money and his apprentice. Perhaps this new lad, the young son of the tanner, would show a talent for smithing. Mrs. Tillery handed her a slice of kidney pie, its crust brown and buttery. It was a delicious meal that Abby would usually have enjoyed with relish, but not lately. Her appetite was much diminished.

“Eat. You must take a bite or two for me. How I shall feel if you don’t have a little? You’re wasting away right under our noses.”

Abby smiled, genuinely this time. Mrs. Tillery was a fine cook, and her kidney pies were a big favorite. She was moved by the realization that this woman who was making such a fuss about her had probably taken great pains to make a pie she knew Abby would enjoy. The gesture was touching, and Abby felt a small stab of guilt

that she had neither the appetite to eat the slice of pie, nor the creativity to tell a convincing lie about why she could not. Under the watchful eye of the neighbor woman, Abby willed herself to eat a small amount, swallowing the morsel as quickly as she dared. She prayed that she could hide the distaste she felt at the richness of the sauce and the heaviness of the meat.

“There, isn’t that better? That’s what you needed: something good to eat, something for your blood.” Mrs. Tillery stood, satisfied that she was helping. “Eat all of that; the kidneys will feed your blood. As pale as you’ve become, I should say that you need it more than your father. You were always such a rosy little thing, so much healthier than your poor dear mother, God rest her sweet soul. What a frail thing she was. But not you – you have your father’s good constitution, and a blessing it has been these many years that you were working for that family at the hall. Serves them right to be robbed, if you ask me. The way they tried to raise themselves above their means.”

Abby let Mrs. Tillery’s chatter drift past her and out the window. Her cat, Honey, pressed against her ankle, and she bent to stroke his back. She was jolted back into the conversation when she heard Eugene’s name.

“You did like the lad, did you not? I saw you together a time or two,” the woman continued meaningfully. “I thought maybe you had expectations of him.”

Abby eyed the older woman warily. “I did, but it’s been a comfort to me that my foolishness is not known...”

“Sweet Abby. Do not trouble yourself to think such silliness. You’re not a fool. I thought you two had an agreement, but I shan’t say a word. Anyway, he was not the most loyal and steadfast of fellows, to tell you the truth, and you know that I would never tell you a lie. And I don’t just mean with that Rebecca; no, dear. I saw him with many different young women.”

Abby blinked away the tears that blurred her vision and nodded wordlessly. She had no trouble believing this of him now, but the feel of his touch – and the way her heart had responded – was still so clear in her memory.

“How very brave you are, to be so young and so resolved. I say that you have your father’s strength in you, of that there can be no doubt,” Mrs. Tillery replied as she settled into the chair across from Abby. “I would have warned you, but you were home so little these

past years, what with your position at the hall. That lot did not deserve you, not if I had my say about it. But you are not the lazy sort, are you? As hard working as your poor father. Yes, of that you take comfort.”

“Poor Father. He’s born this with such good nature. Starting over with a new boy, when he had come to rely on Eugene’s help...”

“It is kindness that makes you think of your father’s loss, when you have lost your position, your money and the man that you wished to marry. But never you worry, being a maid at the Pendletons’ was not a position that anyone wished to have. And now that we all know what kind of man Eugene was, he will not be missed. The money – well, that is a loss but one that can be born. Cheer up, my dear, you have not lost as much as you think. Not when the whole of the village has rallied behind you.”

Strangely, Abby was cheered by the thought. She knew now that she had been foolish to allow her feelings to blind her to the way Rebecca acted whenever Abby mentioned Eugene, and the last conversation she’d had with him, when he’d been so cold and then so comforting, haunted her. She should have seen him for what he was. She *had* been a fool. She would not be one again, not for anyone.

Another knock at the door brought yet another well-meaning neighbor. This time it was Peggy, the wife of the vicar. In her hand was a hamper, and on her face a warm and compassionate smile. With her was Lucy, the wife of the innkeeper. Yes, Abby had to admit that she was surrounded by friends, and for that, she was grateful, even though she wished to be left alone. She wanted to endure her shame and heartbreak in silence, but in a village like Mersey Chapel, where everyone knew each other, there was no such thing as solitude no matter how much she longed for it.

Resigning herself, Abby sat and allowed the women to surround her with their chatter and their support. None of them had much to give but they could show up – and they did. Tea was poured, pies were eaten, and Abby sat gazing out the window.



* * *

Abby's father's misfortunes were soon demoted to barely a mention whenever she went to church or visited the shops on High Street, but her own were a different matter altogether. Her story and her efforts to keep to herself made her a figure of interest. Until someone else came along to provide a focus for the public's gossip, she suspected things would remain this way.

The new apprentice was a promising but scrawny lad who Abby fed up on the extra food the neighbors still brought from time to time. She was stern with him, but her opinion of him was rather high. He was a hard worker; her father seemed to have made a good choice, but even though his father and older brothers were large, Owen himself was undersized.

It was nearly impossible for Abby to believe that it had been a month since she was dismissed from service at Pendleton Hall, a month since Rebecca had stolen her money and her man. Still, her heart ached. When would that end, she wondered as she climbed the hill overlooking Mersey Chapel. Down below, the village lay before her like a painting, so beautiful and peaceful. From her perch high on the hillside, she could sit and admire the beauty of the place she called home.

Settling herself in the tall grass, she plucked a daisy and rolled the stem between her thumb and forefinger. She had thought she could go back to her old life and everything would be as it used to be. And the scandal notwithstanding, it was. The people were the same, the chores were the same, the days were the same. It was Abby who was different. As much as she appreciated every jar of jam, every loaf of bread, and every proffered cup of tea, she was tired of being reminded every day that she was alone, and not a wife, as she had expected to soon be. Her dreams had been destroyed, and there was no hope that she may repair them.

Indeed, she would likely never marry. The village was so small and nearly every young man was spoken for by some other girl. Abby, with her beauty and her good health, was considered by

many to be worthy of admiration – but there were no men free to admire her. Not that she would have welcomed such advances, not when her heart ached for a man she could never have and would likely never see again in her lifetime. A man who did not even exist, in truth.

Unpinning her long blond hair, she undid her braids and let her curls blow in the wind, dancing around her shoulders as she peered at the horizon past the village. What was out there, surrounding the tiny village where she was destined to live out her life alone? She was the subject of pity now, and that would not change as she grew old and penniless.

Leaning back in the tall grass, she closed her eyes and tried to clear her troubles from her mind. Her situation might not be so dire. Maybe she could find a position as a shop girl, or marry a widower. Perhaps one day a single young man might come to the village to stay. Perhaps he would be a tradesman like her father. Yes, she decided, that would be ideal. Then she wouldn't become an old maid or have to face such an uncertain future. She would not be a burden to her father, not that he had ever said any such thing to her. He seemed pleased to have her at home, even if she did think she was too old to be imposing on his kindness.

Drifting into a dreamless sleep under the passing white clouds of a summer sky, she was awakened by a strange noise. A huffing and puffing sound startled her from her rest. Opening her eyes, she sat straight up, wondering what dreadful fate was about to befall her. But it was only Owen. He was running towards her, climbing as fast as his legs would carry him up the hillside, his breath coming fast and heavy, his legs swishing in the tall grass.

“Miss Greene, miss, you must...” the young man doubled over, his knees hitting the ground as he held his side, grimacing as he tried to talk. “You have to come this instant.”

Rising to her feet, Abby approached him swiftly. “You look unwell. Take a moment and rest.”

He was red-faced with exertion, she noticed, and she surveyed the distance he had traversed. The village was far below them; he must have run the whole way up.

“What has happened?” she asked, alarmed. “Is Father alright?”

The boy gasped like a fish, but he nodded.

“Rest, then. Take your ease for a moment and when you are ready, tell me why you are here.”

“There is a rider, come for you. He is waiting.”

“A rider? For me? You must be mistaken.”

“No miss, there’s no mistake about it. I saw the man with my own eyes. A footman – he’s dressed fine as a gentleman, and says he came to see you. I’ve never seen a man like him, and he was riding a big black horse! Bigger than plow horse, tall as the roof of the shop! He asked for you, honest he did. Your father sent me to find you, he told me you would be here. He said,” the young man paused to heave a breath, “He told me not to come back until I found you, if I knew what was good for me. So I ran the whole way up. Tell your father that, so that he won’t send me back home. I want to be a smithy, like him. Tell him, will you do that?”

Abby nodded, hiding a smile. She quite doubted that this horse was as large and fearsome as described by the overwrought youth on the ground at her feet, but they would go and see, as soon as Owen could breathe normally. Whatever could be happening? She waited apprehensively for him to get his breath back.

“Are you ready? Have you rested long enough?”

“I’m feeling much better. Going downhill is always easier than up, is it not?” he asked as he bounced to his feet.

Together they set off, gravity pulling them along. As they went, she wondered if falling down the hillside to her death might be a better fate than what was surely waiting for her at home. A rider come to see her in Mersey Chapel, how very strange indeed, she mused to herself as she made her way down to the village, the young man in tow.

When she arrived home, there was considerable interest in this mysterious rider. Her neighbors were trying very hard not to seem overcome with curiosity as they went about their business. They were careful not to stare or walk too near the tall, dark horse who was drinking water from a bucket. The rider, dressed in sumptuous clothes the likes of which even Sir George Pendleton had never aspired to wear, ignored them in return.

The footman, as well dressed as he was, was also covered in grit and dust from the road, his coat and sleeves were covered in a thin layer of dirt. He looked hot and sweaty, as though he had been riding for a long time.

Abby paused at the corner before she approached. All around her, she could feel the weight of silent scrutiny. She knew that the other villagers were watching her, hoping to hear some scrap of

conversation. She had been the subject of gossip all summer, and now that dubious distinction showed no signs of abating with this stranger's appearance at her house. With the appearance of this footman, her name would surely be mentioned around every table and every fireside that night; she was sure of it.

"Abby, this man has come to see you." Her father greeted her as though she had not been that very same thing by his apprentice.

"Yes, Father, I am here." With a soft word, she invited the man into the house and offered him a glass of water.

Her father closed the door of the cottage, shutting out the villagers and all the prying eyes and listening ears. Abby noticed that his hand was unsteady on the latch. She could not recall when she had seen her father agitated, but he appeared uncertain of himself just now. Her own nervousness grew.

The man was tall, thin, and imperious. He smelled of leather and horse sweat. Reaching into his leather satchel, he pulled out a letter, handing to Abby without ceremony.

She did not realize that she was shaking until she reached for the letter. The paper was thick and heavy with a bright red seal, emblazoned with a crest she had never seen. She was almost afraid to hold it. Clearly, judging from the luxurious quality of the paper and the large remarkable seal, it could not be meant for her.

"There must be some mistake."

"No, daughter, there is not," her father said. He did not meet her eye.

The language on the crest was unknown to her, even though she had been taught to read and write at the village school. Looking at the rider, she asked, "Sir, are you certain that you are in the right village? I am the daughter of Mr. Greene, and as you can see, he is a blacksmith. I do not know anyone who possesses such a seal. I scarcely believe anyone in the village has ever seen its likeness before – not even Sir George at Pendleton house. And that writing, I cannot read it."

The footman's accent was slightly odd to her ears, his manner of speaking suggesting that he may be from somewhere far away. "The language is Latin, Miss Greene. I cannot read it either, but it is the motto of the house I serve. I appreciate your concern, but I give you my word that this letter is meant for you. I was charged with seeing this correspondence delivered to you and only to you, and ordered by my mistress to wait for your reply."

Abby frowned. "Is the matter so very urgent?"

"Open it, Abby," her father said quietly. " His mistress will not want to be kept waiting, and he has traveled a long distance to deliver this letter to you."

Abby stared at her father, wondering how he knew the mistress of this strange man and the distance that he had traveled, and why any person who possessed such means should care to write to her. Carefully, she popped the seal.

The letter was from the county of Shropshire, a place that may as well have been on the other side of the world. Feeling the blood drain from her face, she read the words scrawled across the heavy paper in a hand that was as neat and impressive as any she had ever beheld. The words she comprehended, but the meaning was unclear, and so she read the letter again. Her knees were weak, and she was dimly aware of her father guiding her to a chair as she finished the missive.

She could not believe what she was reading, and so she thrust the letter at her father.

She was not who she had imagined herself to be, and her life would never be the same. Furthermore, there was nothing to be done about it – except to give the rider an answer she did not have, a decision that she did not wish to make.

While her father read the letter she sat in silence, wishing that this strange man in his luxurious clothes had never come to Mersey Chapel.



* * *

Mr. Greene finished the letter and folded it carefully in his scarred hands. "Sir, please excuse us," he said to the rider. "I should like a word in private with my daughter."

The man nodded. "I will return in half an hour; that is all the time that can be spared." He turned on his heel and left the cottage.

Silence fell between Abby and her father, thick as a wall.

"Are you really my father?" Abby asked, finally.

“Yes, I am.” He sounded a little surprised at the thought.

Abby lifted the letter. “If this is my aunt, then your sister is a lady.”

He shook his head. “No. Your mother was a lady. That’s her sister, Lady Charlotte.”

“Why have I not heard of this? Of her?” She reread a section of the letter.

It gives me no pleasure to write to you, but as I have no offspring of my own, you are my nearest relation. It pains me greatly to think that you, the daughter of my sister and that man she eloped with, are all I have left in the world – and the sole heir to my estate and my fortune.

Her father shifted, folding his large frame into a kitchen chair. “Your mother and I eloped two years before you were born. Her family never forgave her, and they never acknowledged you.”

“What? You eloped?”

He nodded sadly. “I worked on one of their estates, Oakfield Manor. The love I had for your mother, Abby, and she for me – it was a rare thing. We needed to be together, so we left. They never spoke to her after that.”

“But then how does she know about me?”

“I wrote to her after your mother’s death. You were so young, just three years old.” The words were still painful for him after all of these years, “Even if she did not care for me or the choices your mother made, I was convinced it was my duty to inform Lady Charlotte that you were born, healthy and alive. It was my wish to inform her that she had a niece since she no longer had a sister. I never expected to receive a word from her or a penny of her money. Not for my sake. But for you, I thought she might make some gesture on her family’s behalf. When she did not send word that she had received my letter, I presumed that she wished to have nothing to do with us.”

Abby was not upset with her father, but she was curious. “Why did you never tell me about her, or anything about my mother’s past?”

“I didn’t want you to grieve for a life of riches and privilege that could never be yours, even if you were entitled to them. What good would that have done you, when you were to be raised in Mersey Chapel, the daughter of the village blacksmith? To make you think of wealth and privilege that would never come? That would have been cruel, so I spared you from such a fate. You were born here,

loved, and raised to be content in this world. It was a mercy to me that you have such a happy nature. What good could have come from knowing any other life but this one?"

Abby's cat leaped into her lap and she stroked it while her eyes went back to the page.

I have sent for you in case you may be a suitable heir to all that I possess. I have no false hope in this regard. You are most likely perfectly common, tainted by the inferior blood of your father.

Abby had never met this person, but already she was sure of one thing: she did not approve of her tone. She was as imperious as Mrs. Pendleton, and Abby had noticed that all women of power and wealth seemed to act and speak this way. She found she had no desire to meet her aunt, even though she was curious about her.

A carriage shall be dispatched from Oakfield in one fortnight to collect you. On the occasion of our meeting, I shall decide whether you will become an heiress or make a hasty return to the life you have led prior to this letter reaching you. Perhaps, by some miracle, my family's lineage will have elevated you.

Gillis will await your reply. If you are a clever girl, then you shall reply with the affirmative to this most generous and unique offer. Make no mistake: this offer will not be repeated. Allow your avarice or your family feeling to guide you if you have the vaguest of either of those motivations.

"Father, why is she insulting me? Does she wish for me to say no to her? I admit that I do not take her meaning for many of the words, but there can be no mistaking her tone. She sounds like Mrs. Pendleton."

Mr. Greene's eyes danced as he grinned, and his hearty laugh broke the tension. "Abby, do not ever let anyone say that you are not blessed with a keen sense of observation. You have never met your aunt but you have made a very correct judgment of her. However, she is truly wealthy and powerful, unlike Mrs. Pendleton, who only wishes that she were. Your aunt is one of the richest women in Shropshire."

"Is that why she writes to me as though I am her servant, giving offense where it suits her?"

"In that regard, she is no better or different from any other lady of her class. No worse, mind you, just used to getting her way in everything. Your mother did not listen to her, and so you have had to suffer because your aunt is a proud, stubborn woman, but you

shall decide for yourself what opinion to have of her. I should not say anything that may influence you or your judgment.”

Abby already knew what her decision was to be and her opinion of the woman who called herself her aunt. She needed no prompting once she had read the letter again, fully understanding the insult and condescension in every line. “Then I shall go on as I have before. I shall be your daughter and not the niece of this great lady, whoever she may be. When the footman returns from the pub, he shall have his answer. Or shall I send Owen to find the man? Why make him wait any longer, when I have made up my mind? My answer is no. Nothing could persuade me to say yes to her offer, the gall of her.”

“You would say no to pretty dresses, carriage rides, and servants of your own?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes, I would say no. Nothing could induce me to accept her offer, not all the money in England. I would rather live my life as a beggar than accept one pound from her.”

Smiling, he patted her hand. “Your mother said the same thing. But Abby, I must insist that you accept her offer, though it gives me great hope to see that you cannot be bought by wealth.”

Abby was shocked. “But why should I say yes? The woman despises me already and she has not even met me. She has never claimed me, or even acknowledged that I was alive! No, I will not. I cannot.”

“Yes, Abby, you can – and you will, for my sake, and your mother’s. Please understand the burden I have felt these many years, knowing that I was the reason your mother lived a short life of hardship when she could have married an earl or a duke. I should never have allowed her to give up her life and her title for me, but she did – and I have always known that if it wasn’t for me, she would have lived out her life as spoiled and petty as Mrs. Pendleton.”

“Was my mother unhappy to be wed to you?” whispered Abby.

“No, she was not, but that does not lessen my guilt. Please, for my sake, accept your aunt’s offer. It is a generous one. I promise that if you do say yes to her, you can decide when and if you shall come home. If you miss Mersey Chapel and the life you led here with me, then you can send me a letter and I will fetch you. I will not force you to live at Oakfield Manor, but you owe it to yourself and your mother to see what life you may have lived if you had

been born there. Say yes, hold your tongue, and do as you are told. Do not allow your pride to cost you the opportunity for a life that you may find you were meant for. It is a rare chance you've been given. Don't let your distaste for this woman cause you to make a hasty decision you may come to regret."

"I don't want to leave you, or travel away from my home here in Mersey Chapel. Shropshire is so far away, must I go?"

"You must. Not for your aunt's sake, but for your own. Abby, think on it. What do you have in Mersey Chapel to keep you here? Besides me, what else have you? Any prospects or position? I do not mean to be unkind, but I want you to think about the opportunity you are being given. You can begin your life somewhere new, many miles away from the past. Your missing wages are but a pittance, compared to this."

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she reached for her father's hand. His words had struck her, just as he intended. She did not want to go to Shropshire but she knew, as he did, that she could not choose a future in Mersey Chapel, not unless she wanted to become a spinster. With a heavy heart, she agreed to accept her father's counsel. She did not wish to meet her aunt; she was sure the woman would be as odious as Mrs. Pendleton, perhaps even more so.

When Gillis returned to the small cottage that afternoon, he was greeted by a subdued Abby and her father. He accepted the news with no surprise, and rode away swiftly into the twilight to tell his mistress that in a fortnight, her niece would be coming to Oakfield Manor.

Chapter Four

Oakfield Manor, England
Summer, 1813

The first sign that she had reached the great estate of Oakfield Manor was the wall that went for many miles along the perimeter of the property. It was made of gray stone, and so, she soon discovered, was the manor house, as she peered out the carriage window at the castle on the hill. How did such a place ever earn the title of manor when the structure that she saw before her was a monstrously large relic of a long-ago world? She had been expecting a residence like Pendleton Hall, and instead she was being taken to a fortress.

The carriage rumbled along a lane that was lined on either side with the houses of a village, with the castle overlooking it all like some enormous bird of prey. In her imagination, she rather thought of Lady Charlotte as just such a creature, staring at the road leading to her house, searching for anyone who did not belong on her property. Anyone like Abby, who was more convinced with every passing minute that she did not have a valid reason to have come here, despite her father's insistence. Why did she ever agree to come here, to be introduced to a woman who truly had no desire to be her aunt?

Four dark horses pulled the carriage across a stone bridge; Abby could scarcely believe the view. It was so beautiful here that Abby wondered if Oakfield was a magical place. Surely, fairies must have roamed here.

To her surprise, the villagers lined the narrow streets to watch the carriage. They did not wave or cheer, but stood silently. Was there so little entertainment in this town, that a coach and four was worthy of admiration? She smiled when she thought of her own village, the one she already sorely missed. She knew that her own people would have done much the same, watching the comings and goings of the Pendletons and remarking on their travels. Perhaps

this place, this strange town in Shropshire, was not so different.

Abby took comfort in that as she sat back against the cushioned seat, her attention on the view outside her window. She had to confess that the scenery was breathtaking in its beauty. The lawns of Oakfield were neatly trimmed, flowers and roses bloomed along hedgerows and the road, and the oak trees were like nothing she had ever seen. It became apparent why Oakfield was named as it was. Oaks, enormous and lush, lined the road, stretching their heavy branches overhead to block the sky. She imagined that once, centuries ago, a great forest of these gigantic trees must have surrounded the castle, groves of oaks that predated the days of the ancient Celts and Britons alike. She was certain she felt the stirring of the old ways among the branches that swayed overhead.

She laughed at herself for her odd thoughts. She had never been superstitious; she was not one to put much stock in the tales told around the hearth, but she had never seen a place so wild and yet so completely under control. It was a medieval village, yet there was a feeling of something far older than that historic era, as though this house, this village and the lands were from a time in the far distant past, ancient and savage.

Just as she was beginning to make sense of her peculiar thoughts, the team of horses that pulled the carriage turned onto a narrow road. Their hooves clattered across a bridge and into the courtyard of the castle. For a moment, Abby felt as a knight of old must have felt upon reaching the sanctuary of the fortress. She was safe from any brigands or thieves upon the road – not that there were any left in Shropshire.

“Oakfield Manor, Miss,” the footman called out as he knocked on the door. Abby was terrified and exhausted – her journey, while reasonably comfortable, had been the longest of her life. She longed for a cup of tea, a sandwich, and somewhere to sleep. She could feel that somewhere in the enormous old castle her aunt sat waiting to judge her and proclaim that Abby was not worthy of the Somerville name. If that was true, there would little reason to unpack her tiny trunk, and she would shortly make the return trip to Mersey Chapel. That fate did not seem so terrible, as Abby yawned and stretched, while the footman opened the door for her.

Carefully navigating the steps of the carriage – with no help from the footman – she soon found herself greeted by a young woman who made a shrill yelping sound at the sight of her before

curtseying and running away.

“How peculiar. I think I may have frightened her,” Abby replied to the footman, but she did not expect an answer.

She was astonished when he did respond. “Did you presume that you would be received properly?”

She recoiled at his insult and was unable to formulate much of an answer, so she stood in the courtyard with her trunk at her feet. Where was Lady Charlotte Somerville? For that matter, was there anyone to greet her, and where had that screeching scared maid run away to? As the carriage and the horses were led away Abby stood alone, feeling very much as she had at Pendleton Hall. Was this what awaited at her Oakfield, to be treated as a maid? If that was what her aunt wished, to employ her as servant, then why had she not said so? Why lure her to Shropshire with falsehoods and empty promises?

She shook out her dress and picked up one end of her trunk, glad that it was not very heavy. She sighed and wondered what on earth she should do now. She was in a courtyard, and looking around, noted the entrance to the stables, the smithy, and the kitchen. To the left was a stone arch that would lead to the front of the castle...and the front entrance.

As she dragged her chest toward the archway she was already composing the letter to her father – the one that would ensure her a ticket home. It was quite obvious that no one was coming to greet her. If she was expected, then this reception indicated that she would be treated like a maid. Even so, she would not act like one. Blinking back tears, dragging the chest with all her worldly belongings inside, she made her way toward the front door of the castle, and an uncertain future.

Chapter Five

Oakfield Manor, England
Summer 1813

The draft was chilling and it cut through her dress, pierced through her skin, and she shivered when she breathed it in. It blew in through the windows, through the large entranceway, and seemed to emanate from the cold stone of the manor itself. It was a building that had many modern amenities, Abby saw when she first entered the manor's grand hall - wooden and plastered paneling, great furs and rugs, a massive hearth of repeatedly recast stonework - but none of that could change the fact of what this "manor" was - a very, very old castle, a fortress of olden times. And as an old medieval castle, all the niceties and additions over the years couldn't hide the reality of what it always was intended to be - a solid defense of impregnable stone, made to stand against outside forces - not a residence for comforts or pleasures, despite its current use as a manor. And with that, it inherited all the trappings of a stonework fortress, including the draft.

Errand boys and maids milled about the edges of the hall, scrubbing the walls, polishing decorations and candelabras, combing the furs and carpets that lined the grandiose paneling. A stage filled the opposite end of the hall, and on it sat a rather regal looking chair, upon which sat a very old, very gray figure. Without thinking, Abby crossed towards the stage, hoping to learn more about this grand manor she would be calling home, and the one who had sent for her to live in it.

And although the cold was rather uncomfortable, Abby knew she was shivering only partly because of it. She was also shivering with nerves. She wished desperately to be somewhere else, anywhere else, really. All the way back out the door, onto the first carriage, and hastily back to Mersey Chapel, if she could. But she remained, locked in place, because the first words she received in that hall were just as biting as any wind, and far more chilling.

“Stay there.”

Maybe it was the way they were said, Abby thought. After working for several years in the screeching and abusive custody of the Pendletons, Abby was very familiar with what it sounded like to be hated and treated cruelly, with insult and criticism.

But this was different. There was disdain somewhere in that cold voice, yes. But it wasn't loud. Abby was stung, but for a moment she didn't realize why she should feel that way.

The speaker could not hate Abby; she'd only just arrived. Yet in just two words, the woman conveyed a deep lack of interest, as though Abby wasn't worth being spoken to.

This was her aunt, Lady Charlotte, Countess of Oakfield Manor and ruler of the surrounding villages at large. This was the lady who single-handedly, controlled real estate and industry in the surrounding region, and had grown prosperous by having her fingers in all local economic affairs. She was the reason most everybody in Shropshire had a livelihood, and this was the reason everybody respected her, and never dared cross her.

All this, Abby learned from Gillis on the way to Oakfield manor, after some hesitation at her curious prompting. And though she would never have expected him to insult his employer, she did note that he had nothing nice to say about her, either. It seemed that everything about Lady Charlotte, even the demeanor of her servants, was cold and distant.

And it stayed that way, even as Lady Charlotte finally rose from her seat at the front of the hall and approached Abby with a slow and pensive air.

Abby froze in place, not sure what she would do. Lady Charlotte was indeed a very elderly lady, small and hunched with a curve in her upper back. However, she moved ably enough with her long staff of polished wood topped with a rounded end adorned with gold and jewels, like a scepter. The jewels, Abby noted, were nothing like Mrs. Pendletons' lost baubles. There was nothing very flashy to draw the attention; these were much more subtle, and yet they were exquisite.

After realizing this, and as Lady Charlotte slowly continued to approach, Abby couldn't help to compare this lady with her former employer. The jewels were only the beginning. Mrs. Pendleton was a large woman, hiding her chins and sweat under thick layers of makeup and face-paints. Lady Charlotte, on the other hand, was

small and seemingly frail. She wore no makeup, although she did seem to wear years of age. Mrs. Pendleton wore bright colors, while Lady Charlotte's dress was in earth tones and grays, hidden away under a clean and elegant white fur. Mrs. Pendleton moved about as if she was leading herself in some sort of waltz, and despite her nerves, Abby felt the corner of her mouth twitch at the thought, watching Lady Charlotte step toward her with slow grace and command. Abby could only stay in place as Lady Charlotte clacked, clacked, clacked her staff against the floor with each direct step, like a predatory animal knowing exactly where to go for its victim.

Everything about Mrs. Pendleton – her looks, her actions – said that she overlaid herself with gaudiness to hide her failings. Lady Charlotte had no use for gaudiness. And all she had to show was strength.

Even so, shaking in her boots, Abby noted that she would rather be in the company of the Pendletons at that moment, instead of in the middle of this dark, cold castle, slowly preyed upon by this mystery of an aunt, diminutive and yet exhuming power – real power – unlike the squeaking of the Pendletons. *Oh, why did I even come here*, she thought.

But she knew why, she told herself – her father. Her dear father did not want to watch her withering in the village, the victim of scandal. He had encouraged her to seek out her mother's old relations, to look at everything her mother's heritage had to offer, and make the choice as to whether or not she wished to change her life. She had a unique opportunity here, and he wanted the best life for her that she could have. He loved her.

Now, surrounded by the cold walls of Oakfield Manor, she needed that love more than ever. Because although the words of Mrs. Pendleton could be cutting, the cold malaise of Lady Charlotte went far deeper, Abby thought, seemingly to her very soul. The warmth of happier times was all that could keep her standing.

Once Lady Charlotte was finally close enough to get a good look at Abby, she stared at her through narrowed eyes. Only when she had scrutinized Abby for a long moment did she speak. "Your pedigree is lower middle stock."

Abby blinked. The letter had made it clear enough that Lady Charlotte knew her father was a blacksmith. But the tone she used to make this observation made it seem as if she were acknowledging some fact, and certainly not inviting conversation.

“Well, yes, My Lady,” replied Abby cautiously and politely, which was the best way to approach any unknown situation. But even she could hear the tremor in her own voice, curse her nerves.

“Your dress is clean,” the woman continued. “Probably the best you have for introductions.”

Abby held her place. It was, indeed, her favorite dress – the one she had hoped Eugene would like. In truth, she could no longer afford a second nice dress for meetings. Lady Charlotte might fully realize that, but Abby was mystified as to why the woman would make these observations out loud.

Rounding Abby slowly, the lady continued, “You are educated.”

“Well, somewhat. I did go to school in my younger days, but, then my father grew older and...well, he couldn’t move about as much and required help, so I stayed home to cook and clean. And, later, earn some money in service.”

“Yes. And how is the estate of George Pendleton?”

For a moment, Abby forgot herself and snapped to attention. “You know the Pendletons?”

“Yes, I remember George,” Lady Charlotte responded indifferently. “His family name is old in England, but his ancestors squandered their wealth. When I last knew him, George was noble in name only. I heard he married into some money – all soon squandered as well. Is it true?”

Abby wasn’t sure how to take any of this, much less answer it. “Th-they...seemed,” she stammered, before deciding to take the safe approach, “...they were a noble family and I served them well.”

Lady Charlotte looked her in the eye but did not reply. There came no acknowledgment, actually. Just the dull, continuing clack of her staff as it made its way around her again. Abby wasn’t sure if she should break her silence, and she blinked back tears. What was going on? Who was this woman?

By this point, Lady Charlotte had finished another circle around Abby and wound her way back before her. “Well, yes,” she said, as though there had been a conversation going on. “We have dresses that will fit. Your education is lacking, but it is true that this is through no fault of your abilities, but rather, circumstances from your... parentage. You will catch up, I’m sure. Poetry, economics, the like. I will send for a tutor and you will begin immediately. As to... whatever personal effects you bothered to bring, we will have them washed. Ellie will see to it; she can be your handmaiden for a

time.”

Everything Lady Charlotte said was in a tone as though she were relaying the day’s tasks aloud, so Abby was slow to realize that this meant she was expected to stay.

“I...forgive me, but do you mean for me to stay? I’m afraid I’m quite confused.”

For the first time since she arrived, Abby saw an expression on Lady Charlotte’s face – an emotion. Unfortunately, it was impatience.

“I did send you the letter for a reason.”

Abby’s mouth opened to ask another question, though she couldn’t think what it might be. But Lady Charlotte’s back was now turned, and the woman walked slowly away.

She was halted by Gillis’s voice at the doorway, calling, “My, my Lady Charlotte, I regret to—”

“LADY CHARLOTTE!!”

Abby spun on the spot to see the panicked servant desperately trying to slow the pace of a visitor who barged in, obviously uninvited, and was heading straight towards the two women. A gentleman in his early thirties and in relatively good health, he was finely dressed but ever so frazzled. His hair was unkempt and he wore dusty boots and an unkempt shirt, as though he had simply leaped up from his earlier affairs and made his way here in haste. Abby froze in horror and fascination.

The man marched forward until he was right upon them, and eyeing her momentarily, turned his attention to Lady Charlotte. “And this is?”

The lady’s response came happily, almost melodically, from behind her. “Why, this is Lady Abigail Somerville, daughter of Lady Georgette Somerville, my dear departed sister, late of this house. Lady Abigail is heiress to the Oakfield estate. Why do you ask?”

He seemed ready to pop right out of his shirt and jacket. The visitor’s face grew round and red as it turned towards Abby, then towards Lady Charlotte, then Abby again, staring at her with all the intensity his narrowed eyes could muster. And then, as quickly as he marched in, he turned on his heel and marched away, followed by a very upset Gillis.

After everything that had happened today – the cold reception, the threatening entrance, the seeming meaninglessness of it all – Abby finally felt every part of her being reach a boiling point. She

could contain it no longer. "What was that?!" she cried.

So soon after seeing the shadow of irritation on her aunt's face, Abby was mystified now to see the glimmer of a smile.

"That," she answered, staring at the man as he left, "was Baron Conrad Wallen...good." And then Lady Charlotte turned slowly with the aid of her staff and hobbled back to her throne. There were no orders, no commands, no instructions as to what Abby is to do with herself– nor were there any additional tasks given, verbally or otherwise, to the other servants in the room. They were still working, unchanged by anything that had transpired in the short time since she entered.

Once Abby realized the introduction was over, she gathered what few things she had with her and left to find some quiet corner of the regal but cold and draughty castle. And when she did finally find a room for herself, she crumpled on the bed and cried.

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Chapter Six

Oakfield Manor, England
Late summer, 1813

Abby stood upon the battlements of the old stone walls surrounding the village of Oakfield within its borders. There was a time earlier in the summer when she was somewhat awestruck by their old gray stones, relics medieval times. Their original purpose had passed, much like the manor castle's, but she liked to use them as a lookout because they let her see out over the wider surrounding countryside of Shropshire. Most of the area was covered with its magical oaken forests, wilder than the trees carefully and deliberately planted on the manor's grounds. But there were areas of the surrounding lands where the forests had long been cut down, and families had set up farms in their stead.

This was an interesting time to be looking out at the farmlands, Abby knew. The crops had grown, and in the next few weeks all the local folks would band together for the harvest season, communally cutting, gathering, and bundling their crops of wheat and oats and, well, all the various grains they grew around here. It would be quite busy indeed.

Abby knew this because Mersey Chapel did something quite similar, as did any hamlet with farms. Harvesting miles and miles of land was intense work, and it certainly couldn't be done by each farmer alone. Typically, every able-bodied man and some of the eager boys would work all the farms, taking turns between the cutting, the bundling, even some of the threshing later on. The ladies got involved, too, typically preparing bread, cheeses, hearty meats, and creamy desserts if they could manage it. And water, of course – it wouldn't do to let the men pass out under the sweltering sun. They did what they could to turn a laborious task into late summer days of singing, get-togethers, and, Abby recalled with a slight smile, the occasional bit of flirting.

Harvest season was quite different for Abby when she was

younger. For the Greenes, this time of year usually meant an upswing in business, constantly shoeing and reshoeing the horses and repairing wagon wheels. When she was older and went to work for the Pendletons Abby missed this, but she had good memories of bringing cool water out to her father and Eugene—

A heaviness rested upon her chest. She knew he was a thief and a scoundrel, but in those days, she had loved him. Perhaps, she thought with pursed lips and a huff, the less she thought of old times, the better.

In a whirl, she was back out the battlement door, down the circular stone steps, and exiting through the wooden gate back into the village alleyways, where two horses awaited along with their groom, old Tursley.

In minutes, Abby was mounted and they were on their way. Tursley was a nice enough old man, if perhaps a bit private and gruff. Lady Charlotte had assigned him the task of instructing the “simple blacksmith’s daughter” how to ride a horse. Both teacher and pupil soon learned that these were pleasant hours since riding came easily to Abby. Abby’s father had certainly shod his share of horses, but he could never actually afford one of his own (nor did he need one), so Abby had never learned to ride. And yet, when old Tursley explained the basics and threw her on the back of a mare, she took to it like a duck to water. Abby had never dared to believe that there would come a time when riding one of these beautiful creatures could be an everyday treat.

In fact, a lot of these past weeks had been like that for Abby. She had already been adept enough at reading and basic mathematics, but ever since coming into Lady Charlotte’s realm, she had been introduced to various romantic books of poetry and treatises on thoughts and philosophies (her tutor dared to say that, given her quick mind, she might even be ready to start learning some of the classical languages in earnest). She also readily absorbed concepts of economics and accounting, principles her tutors explained would do her well in her future role of overseeing the finances of the county.

It was disappointing, Abby mused, that it was only her tutors who thought she was clever. Lady Charlotte was the one who arranged all these lessons – arranged everything, really, from fineries to schedules, even what horse would suit her best – yet the lady herself rarely communicated directly with Abby. They hardly

spoke. With her aunt holed up in her private study, Abby learned of her commands secondhand, always secondhand, from this servant or that. Abby thought it was odd that this woman, this aunt of hers, gave her so much of her wealth, but so little of herself.

She had become used to it and eventually stopped craving her aunt's attention.

Oakfield was not without mysteries to occupy the mind. As old Tursley led the horse across the Main Street running through the village, Abby could look down the long road, and from this position, just barely catch a glimpse of a frequent visitor, right on time. Off in the distance, out in the fields on the outskirts of town, she could just make out the loveliest riding horse among the various farmers and their Clydesdales, this one carrying upon its back a well-dressed gentleman. Baron Wallen.

The baron was the owner of various farms away from Oakfield, and apparently had a small manor of his own out over the horizon, though she didn't know exactly where. It was probably not unlike the Pendleton's, Abby thought with a little sneer. She couldn't make him out clearly, but he was there often enough, and everybody noticed him when he was near, so it was hard not to associate the figure with the man. On occasion, he rode close enough that she could make him out quite clearly, and it was then that she saw his inquisitive expression. That first day they met, in the Grand Hall of Oakfield Manor, he had looked as though he couldn't figure out what was going on. Now, after all this time, his expression was less angry and more restrained, but he still seemed as bemused as ever.

But she and old Tursley rounded a corner and he was out of sight again. No matter; she had better things to attend to today. Much, much better things, she thought with a smile.

There was a time not long ago when Abby would come up with the most embarrassing fibs and stammered excuses, trying to find a reason to make old Tursley change their riding route to a specific area outside the walls of the village. It amused her now, how quaint her efforts were. First of all, she realized that she had probably never fooled old Tursley, and considering how bad her silly lies were, she likely would not have fooled anybody. Secondly, the more time she spent with the old groom, the more she realized he didn't care much what she did anyway.

Aside from riding practice (which they both agreed without saying anything that she didn't really need at this point anyway),

Abby had the additional task of cataloging the damage and repairs needed to the dwellings and buildings in Oakfield's tanning district. She had finished that half an hour ago, far ahead of schedule. So as long as she didn't get old Tursley thrown off of his horse because of what he called her "silliness," and as long as she didn't get him in trouble for loafing, as far as they were concerned, she could go where she pleased. That suited Abby just fine. Tursley was as remote as Lady Charlotte in some ways, but almost everyone in her new life was.

Except for one person.

This was the reason she'd climbed the stone battlements this morning. Aside from the long and lovely view of the countryside, she could quickly check if Ellie was at home. As the horses crossed the main gate and headed around the outside of the walls, Abby could already see the dwelling, a simple little hut of wood and stone with a thatched roof jutting out from the outside of the town walls. Easy to maintain and simply but well designed, it used the wall as one side of this quaint little hut. Although her own father's home was all stone – it had to be, because of the forge – Abby did remember many homes in Mersey Chapel that leaned against a hillside. They were usually as busy as hives.

It was perfect, then, that the young lady who emerged from within seemed as lively as the house she kept.

"Oh, M'Lady" came the sweet little voice, revealing that the visit was expected and very much welcome.

Ellie was the young lady of this house and Abby's handmaiden in the manor. When they'd first met, Abby couldn't help but compare her to a scared little mouse, the way she squeaked and yelped before curtsying and scurrying away to whatever corner of Oakfield Manor the lady had sent her that day. She was the first kind person Abby had met in that cold building. As luck would have it, she was only a few years younger than Abby, and since she was a junior lady's maid, Lady Charlotte saw her as an acceptable fit as Abby's personal attendant.

"Oh, dear Ellie," started Abby, "I do hope I'm not intruding on your day off from the Manor's labors." Ellie cocked her head and exhaled. "Well, as it were, with father and my brothers out to stook, I'm spending the day cleaning around here!"

"Ah! Well then, I hope I intrude just enough!"

They laughed and hugged before stepping inside.



* * *

“Oh no, please don’t say it’s so! It was Eugene, wasn’t it?”

Ellie briefly stopped scrubbing her pots to look up at Abby. Although she listened sympathetically to Abby’s tale of woe, she nevertheless was behind in her chores and knew her father would need these pots tomorrow. Even her friend’s story wouldn’t stop her from her diligent work. But this part of the story, this betrayal, it was too much to keep going with the cleaning.

“Well...yes. Yes, it was.” answered Abby. She watched a bit of dry grass blow across the floor and itched to pick up the broom, but she knew she mustn’t. If anyone saw her they’d be shocked, and it would be certain to get back to Lady Charlotte.

“Eugene told that...that wretched witch Rebecca where you hid your savings! Oh, I’m sorry for saying so, but I can’t imagine how upset you must have been.”

“It was a terrible blow,” Abby said. It helped to talk about it; the whole affair was still rather close to her heart. “I must say, though, you seem to have grasped the affair far quicker than I did.”

“I...whatever do you mean, M’Lady?”

“Well,” Abby started with a shy little smile, “I have to admit, when I learned of Eugene’s involvement I was devastated. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that Rebecca learned of the money by any means other than happenstance. And I certainly never thought that Eugene had been communicating with her, and in...” Abby stopped and composed herself. “...and indeed, with so many other women. Yet you are hearing of this affair for the first time, and immediately guessed it was Eugene who was involved.”

After a short moment of thought, Ellie returned to her bin of soapy water and scrubbed away. “I suppose, if I were in love with the man, I might not have seen it coming. But...well, hearing the tale, step by step, I suppose it just made sense that the money was taken not long after you told somebody where it was for the first time.”

She was right, Abby thought. It made Eugene an obvious

suspect, and perhaps, if Abby hadn't been so love-sick, scared of losing her precious Eugene, she would have thought it through rationally. But she had loved him so. She had been so desperate for Eugene's love, or at least the idea of pure love, that she had missed the obvious, staring her right in the face.

Her love had blinded her, Abby thought to herself, and the shame of her stupidity heated her cheeks. She told herself that such a simpleton as herself would probably never marry, since no sensible man would have her. She watched Ellie wring out her rag, grateful for the girl's friendship.

Abby knew what it meant to be a servant girl, and despite their different circumstances now, only a few weeks ago they would have met as equals. Here was a young woman who had shrunk away at the first sight of her, but soon came to trust and know Abby for herself. *Bless Ellie for treating me with such kindness*, she thought.

"Yes," Abby finally continued. "Yes, he did tell Rebecca about the money, and Rebecca stole from our employer as well. Mrs. Pendleton blamed me for her missing valuables, and she was so enraged that she wasted precious hours which could have been spent tracking down the thieves. As you can imagine, they absconded with everything. I never heard from them again. It was not long after that, I received news that I should come to Oakfield, and...well, all that you know."

Ellie sank onto a stool across from Abby. "I wonder where they are now."

"Oh, heaven only knows. Likely London; it's where Rebecca always complained she wasn't during her various illnesses. But, really, they could be anywhere. Well, good riddance, I say."

With a heave, Ellie grabbed the wash bin of water – easily the same weight as herself – and lugged it out the door. "Well, if I may say, M'Lady, whatever fate befell those...those curs, M'Lady, forgive my language, but whatever happened to them, you can rest assured you won't find people like that out here in Oakfield. We are good and happy people, kind to our neighbors and willing to watch over one another! And if ever some rotten apple were to worm its way in, you can rest assured Lady Charlotte would have him plucked out before the rot began to spread!"

"Yes, she does seem rather capable." It was the nicest thing she could say about her aunt, since there was little to say at all. A thought occurred to her.

“Ellie,” she asked, “is that what happened to that Baron Wallen? Did Lady Charlotte root him out in some way?”

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

“Well, I just can’t fathom what happened between them. I met Baron Wallen the day I arrived. He seemed infuriated by my presence, and Lady Charlotte...well, I can only say she seemed pleased about that. Are they at odds with one another?”

“Well, I’m sure I do not know, M’Lady. The affairs of lords and ladies are above me. I do know that, whatever they are to each other, they are not beholden to each other. Lord Conrad Wallen is a landowner – he has plenty of property outside Oakfield. From what I’m told, he’s well off, though not nearly as wealthy as Lady Charlotte. Perhaps that is what ails him. Maybe he is jealous of her money.”

“That would indeed harm a man’s ego,” Abby replied, “but that may be too simple an answer. When he stormed into the manor, it was to demand to know who I was. It was about me, or perhaps my mother. Ellie, what do you know of my mother, or my father? They were both from this area, but left shortly before I was born.”

“If that is the case, M’Lady, then I’m afraid I cannot help. I’m younger than you; forgive me for saying so. Whatever happened between your parents was long before I could make note of it.”

“Indeed. Well, perhaps...oh, for the love of all that is good!!”

Ellie turned to look out her window at what had affected her mistress so, and gasped. Not one minute after they were gossiping about Baron Wallen there he was, upon her lawn, walking towards the house. Ellie saw the color drain from Abby’s face; perhaps she feared he had somehow heard what she had been saying.

Abby stepped out across the threshold and stood before the baron as he approached, with Ellie nervously coming up behind her. Unlike his original appearance at the manor, this time he looked elegant and rather dignified, as a man in his position may. Perhaps Abby herself should look sociable as well, but at this point, she’d had enough. He was a terror when they first met, and he’d been practically stalking her ever since. After everything she had tolerated with Mrs. Pendleton, with Rebecca, with Eugene! If there was anything to be said, she would have it out in the open now.

He came before her and gave a polite bow. Noticing Tursley lurking nearby with the horses, Abby summoned every ounce of dignity she could muster.

Raising his head, the baron spoke. "A lovely noontime to be seeing you, Lady Abigail Somerville. I hope the morn found you well."

Abby found herself unable to answer, so she merely gave him a regal nod.

The baron continued, "I feel that my first introduction was hastily executed and poorly conducted. I hope you can accept my apology. In all sincerity, and with all due respect to your family, I am hoping I may have a chance to reintroduce myself. Perhaps this afternoon, you could accompany me on horseback for a tour of my lands? I would be pleased to show you around."

Abby was flabbergasted. Short of breath and feeling like she was floating, she knew she had to regroup and collect herself. "I'm... afraid my...day is quite set," she stammered. And then, with just a small smile, added, "Another time, perhaps."

"Very well," came the reply. His tone was neither curt nor dismissive, and though his reply was brief, he met her eye, and Abby felt warmed by his expression. Abby watched him leave and marveled that this was the same man she had encountered on her first day in Oakfield.



* * *

Bless little Ellie, Abby thought on the way back to the manor. She had needed a good visit and a chat away from the hallowed halls she now called home. It was an experience she was missing from her old life in Mersey Chapel. The women there were usually kind and genuine people, always more than willing to put a smile on her face. Whether it was a freshly baked kidney pie or a faithful grip on a scared girl's shivering arm, she could always count on somebody being there for her. This was why her friendship with Ellie was so precious to her.

Which made her departure from Ellie's home all the harder. Tomorrow, when Ellie was back at work at the manor, the two of them would have to mind their behavior while others were around,

so as not to seem too familiar. But before she left, Ellie had wondered if Abby might come to the harvest festival – a party the local townsfolk would have in the fall, to celebrate the end of the harvesting and threshing.

Abby felt a warm joy at the prospect, of course. She'd attended Mersey Chapel's dances when she was a very little girl. When she got older her father forbade it, ironically claiming she was "too young" to go, as if she didn't know now what he really meant. And in the last few years, she had been too busy at the Pendletons'. She would love to attend.

But as she now sat in the garden of Oakfield Manor pretending to study her Latin, she knew she couldn't go. Because this wasn't Mersey Chapel, and she wasn't the pretty blacksmith's daughter. Instead, she was Lady Abigail Somerville, heiress to the Oakfield estate, and by extension, heiress to the reason most of the attendees at the festival had a livelihood at all. She knew that most of the men there would be nervous around her, much as all her neighbors were once wary of the Pendletons. And even if they did react well to her, they would not be friendly – for the same reason Lady Charlotte would likely never approve. Because the village festival is not a venue frequented by the next countess.

Ah yes, Lady Charlotte – that enigma of a mistress who presided over everything in her life. Abby often felt helpless and lonely here, and there were times she would wish to be free from all this. And yet, there was nothing so horrible to be freed from. She lived in an exquisite castle and her future was secured. Most would give anything for such a life, and Abby had it handed to her on a silver platter – but she felt nothing because the hand that passed on such riches was so cold. Lady Charlotte's need for an heir made her provide such a lovely future for Abby, but she had no interest in getting to know her niece. That much had been obvious from the very first day they'd met in the hall. The only time Lady Charlotte had seemed at all pleased was when Baron Wallen came bursting in.

The baron!

Abby dropped her book and her pretense of studying and got up to stroll through the garden, looking at that situation anew. The baron had entered, encountered Abby for the first time, and Lady Charlotte acted as if it was exactly what she wanted. Didn't she even say that it was good?

When did she ever say anything was good?

And just now, all that effort the baron put into in his little reintroduction, every effort made to...

And just like that, Abby saw everything connect as if it had always been so crystal clear. It was all about bringing the two of them together! The only time she ever saw Lady Charlotte smile was when they met. But such a meeting went so poorly, they needed a better one. Had the baron followed her and spied on her from a distance, to find the best way to approach her, and present himself in a more “successful” way? Was all this orchestrated to endear him in her heart? With an almost seething resolve, Abby wondered whether she had been brought all this way to be offered to the baron.

After all of Eugene’s lies and betrayals, after realizing there would be no love in her life, the very nerve of this chilly benefactor to suddenly force one upon her was an insult. After everything she’d been through!

No, Abby thought. Absolutely not. There had been so much upheaval in her life, she wasn’t going to be flung into some arranged marriage to a man about whom she knew nothing! This was, indeed, the last straw. Whatever this horrid woman was thinking, Abby would get through to Lady Charlotte and put a stop to this.

And as luck would have it, all it took was one turn around the hedge to find, of all people, Lady Charlotte approaching her in the garden at that very moment.

“Good evening, Abby. I’ve found you at last.” As far as Abby could remember, was this the first time Lady Charlotte had called her by her name. It was certainly the first time she’d been greeted with any warmth.

“It is good that you found me, aunt. I need to speak to you.” Abby steeled herself and vowed she would stand up to this domineering old woman.

“I see,” replied the lady. “Then you have heard from Mersey Chapel about Rebecca.”

Of all the things she might expect Lady Charlotte to say to her, this one was, by far, the most disarming.

“How...how do you know about...”

“About the thief? Well, obviously, after learning of your work at the Pendleton household, I got in touch with the family to learn more about what had transpired in your old life. Although their

accounts were quite biased, I learned the details. A fiendish wench, manipulative and untrustworthy, seduced your former beau and made off with your meager earnings.”

Abby blinked and took a seat next to the older woman on a cold stone bench.

When no response came, Lady Charlotte continued. “Yes, well, I wanted you to know that she was found in London. It was rather difficult, but there really is no reason to have such riches and resources if not to use them. I simply made connections with old acquaintances in London, and they are prepared to arrest her, if you wish.”

“Wh...what? Arrest her? My...My Lady, do you mean...” With a deep breath, Abby composed herself as much as she could. “My Lady Charlotte, I am grateful, of course, but after all this time I had almost forgotten about the money, and...”

“Well, obviously,” interrupted Lady Charlotte, “you’re surrounded daily by far more than what was taken. It’s not about the money; it was never about the money! But I thought you should be told that the woman who stole from you has been sitting in a parlor in London, enjoying sweetbreads with your money, possibly even with your former intended at her beck and call.” Lady Charlotte paused, watching Abby’s face. “I would hear your opinion on how we should proceed.”

Abby frowned thoughtfully and was surprised at the rush of hot anger that burned in her belly. All this time, Rebecca had been enjoying herself, possibly with Eugene, knowing what they had done to Abby and the Pendletons.

“That girl took what was yours. I wonder if she and Eugene are laughing about it, even now.”

She glanced at her aunt, and in the woman’s eyes she saw the acknowledgment she had been waiting for all this time. Knowing that the Lady Charlotte had made this effort on her behalf, Abby took heart. And she knew what must be done.

“I would like them to be arrested.”

Lady Charlotte nodded impassively, but as she rose and turned to leave, Abby was certain she saw the older woman smile.

She felt as if a great weight had lifted from her shoulders.



* * *

September equinox, 1813

Dear Father,

I recently learned that authorities in London have arrested Rebecca Geller. As you may remember, she was the other maid who worked with me at the Pendleton estate not too long ago. It was she who stole my savings with the aid of your former apprentice, Eugene. At this time, I am not certain if she intended to stay in London or abscond to some other location and had merely stopped in London along the way. Nevertheless, I am grateful that we can trust in our system of law and that criminals are still afforded what they deserve for their actions.

Abby stopped writing, not sure where to continue from there. She read what she had written thus far, hoping for something that may inspire her. She had certainly written letters to her father before – once a week, in fact, since she arrived at Oakfield Manor – but those ones were always filled with the chattering of her heart, whether relating the chilliness of Lady Charlotte, the sweet nature of young Ellie, or even the longing she felt to be in her father's company once more. It seemed that her life now was an endless round of tutors and lessons, and telling her father about it made her feel detached from him. She found it harder to muster much of anything to say.

Perhaps part of the problem was that she was, in fact, holding back words she knew she could say. Angry words about how she regretted that Rebecca's sentencing couldn't begin sooner. Frustration about how Eugene had not been found with her, and was still out in the world somewhere, no doubt seducing his way into the change purse of some other hapless girl. And her suspicion about her aunt's plans regarding Baron Conrad Wallen.

And as a result, how uncomfortable Abby had begun to feel about her benefactor.

While all this was true, she didn't want to sound unhappy and cause her father to worry. She was also aware of a shift within

herself, and she was beginning to question whether she had changed since she'd left home. That wasn't how she wished to be heard. But where were the jokes, and the good wishes, and the sense that there was still a brightness in the air? What did she have left to write to her father? Except, as was evident, the day to day affairs of Oakfield Manor.

Well, she thought, there was nothing for it. In any case, she knew her father would be pleased to hear from her at all. And, perhaps, she could redeem the page by closing it better than how it started:

I am certain, Father, that all will work itself out in the end, as it always does for those who believe in the goodness of this world. I thank you, and am eternally grateful to you, for believing in me. Without your trust, I could not grow happier with every passing day.

*Be happy, my sweet father,
~Abby*

Abby read it once more. It was not the most inspiring letter, but she knew it would bring a smile to her father's face all the same.

Even though she couldn't see it anymore.

Allowing the ink to dry on the windowsill, she prepared the wax and seal while looking out her window to the world beyond. The forest was as mysterious and forbidding as always, but it was changing, for the leaves had begun to turn a brilliant yellow and crimson red, in some areas. In the back of her mind, she recalled being yelled at for not distinguishing red from crimson in Mrs. Pendleton's ugly dresses. If she could have her way now, she would go back to that old shack and burn every last dress right before her mistress's eyes. She might even inform the sad woman of how her precious Rebecca had been caught out as a thief. Wouldn't that be quite the day, Abby thought.

With the ink dry, she stamped the letter closed, in time to see Gillis's carriage arriving at the manor. With a quick sprint, Abby arrived at the front hall just as the servant in question came in with a handful of correspondence. He made a quick turn towards Lady Charlotte's chambers.

"Gillis, a moment!" Abby commanded. Gillis stopped with an exacerbated sigh. In all this time, Gillis had never stopped treating Abby with self-righteous disrespect, and he was always eager to

express how unhappy he was to be around her. She couldn't understand how the Lady Charlotte put up with it, for she was certain that, although Gillis never acted with such rudeness and disdain towards the lady, he never showed deference towards her either.

Turning with an exhausted sway, he faced her and exhaled, "Yes, Madam?"

"I have a letter for you to deliver. Please send it with all haste."

"I only just returned from London!" He whined.

Abby frowned. "Well, this one need not go so far. It's just going to the same place you go every fortnight."

"What?"

Abby started to get impatient with the man. "Where you sent all my correspondence!"

"Your what? I don't... Oh! Yes, right – Mersey, yes."

Abby narrowed her eyes. "Hold on. Gillis, where do you deliver my letter every fortnight?"

Gillis would not meet her eyes. He looked embarrassed, maybe even a little angry at being asked. "The same place every time."

"Which is where?"

"Where the Lady Charlotte tells me to."

"Yes, and you've been going there regularly, so you can tell me just by memory, surely."

"Miss, perhaps this is something you should discuss with the Lady Char..."

"WHERE?"

Abby was surprised by her own raised voice. But she was so tired, so tired of having to put up with Gillis.

The footman wouldn't meet her eye. He just stared straight down, with his arms at his side. Abby realized what was happening.

"You haven't delivered any of my letters to Mersey Chapel, have you?"

Gillis finally lifted his head to meet her eye, and the look he gave her had a defiant and challenging air. "I haven't been to Mersey Chapel since I acquired you. Every letter you gave me, the Lady Charlotte ordered me to give to her. She said there was no reason to deliver them. This has nothing to do with me. None of this does! I've just come back from London, and I need a rest!"

And with that, he turned and left her. Abby, her mind blank, also turned and went outside to the stables. She found the nearest

horse and rode off.



* * *

Half a year earlier, Abby reacted to tragedy by curling up into a little ball and crying like a baby. It was all she knew to do, and of course her options had been limited. She'd had no power, nowhere else to go, and no way to get there – she could only retreat to a corner of her attic room or her father's shed. She could flee to the hills outside Mersey Chapel, if the weather was agreeable.

Not this time. Now, with money to spare and horses to ride, the knowledge that Lady Charlotte conspired with Gillis to keep her letters away from her ailing father filled her with rage. She wanted to get as far away from Oakfield Manor as she possibly could – away from the cold stone, away from the people, away from everything associated with this wretched den of secrecy and lies! She rode her mare deep into the forest around the estate.

And although the mare's galloping legs were powerful, Abby knew in her heart that she still didn't have anywhere to go. She slowed the horse to a walk and wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Curse that Lady Charlotte! Abby gritted her teeth. Curse this whole place. Something was wrong here. She couldn't quite see the whole picture yet, but her instincts warned her that all was not as she had been led to believe. She'd left the Pendletons and was now living in apparent comfort – but she was still a pawn. She still had no control over her own life. Little had changed.

"I must say, this is a welcome surprise."

Abby had been so overwhelmed in her frustration and anger that she hadn't been paying attention to her surroundings. She had strayed to an area of the forest where she had never been.

The voice belonged to Baron Wallen. Had she been paying the least bit of attention, she would have seen him a mile off, with his peacock-blue riding coat and gleaming white collar, he certainly did not blend in to the forest.

She paused to consider the situation as he rode toward her through the trees. She would never have chosen to meet him this way, but here she was. Perhaps, she decided, now was a good time to get some answers to her questions.

“And a good day to you, Baron Wallen,” she replied. “I believe you wanted to offer me a tour of your lands?”



* * *

There were parts of the forest that were thick with the most beautiful golden leaves, rustling and breathing with the wind that danced between the branches that held them aloft. But the canopy was still thin enough in some areas that glistening noontime sunbeams burst through, creating rays that danced across the trunks behind them. The horses' hooves rustled among soil and branches, and they could hear the sound of the brook that ran trickling through this area. Its waters sparkled in the light, winding to and fro, feeding its sweet nectar to the mosses, brush, and occasional willows that began to grow in earnest in this area. When Abby breathed in deeply, she could feel that cool sense of autumn, laden with the scents of the forest under the sunny sky. This was a place as magical as what she'd first thought Oakfield was upon her initial arrival. If there really were faeries in this world, she was certain they would dance here.

Perhaps the baron saw her thoughts on her face, for he said, “I love this place as well. In fact, I have requested that the people who reside on my estate never hunt or forage here, so the animals will thrive. And in exchange, they have free rein to enjoy this land as much as they please, much as we are now. I like to think they understand the need for this beauty.” A pause, before he added, “That, or they found better firewood in the next magical glade over.”

Abby laughed, and Baron Wallen laughed with her. With everything that was happening, it was nice to be able to enjoy herself, she realized. In this lovely moment, trotting their horses

alongside a stream, seeing the magic of nature open up before them, Abby found herself remembering what it was like to enjoy a land, and not simply live upon it. There had been so much work and study associated with Oakfield Manor these many weeks, Abby reveled in this chance to truly enjoy the land.

Over the course of the next hour, Abby let the baron do the talking. He spoke of the different trees, spoke of the local people of his lands (by name more often than not; he knew many of his residents personally). He spoke of his childhood, his taking control of the lands after his father's passing, of old silly dreams, and the growth that roused him into reality. He spoke kindly and often whimsically. Abby found herself chatting happily as well.

"...and just beyond this hill is a highway tavern and inn. Old Gimwel runs it; he used to give me sugarcane to chew when I was younger. He used to own a farm just southeast of the inn as well, but there was a bad season about seven years back, and unfortunately Lady Charlotte made him an offer I couldn't. I can't blame him, really."

And there it was, Abby thought – the topic of her aunt.

"Why couldn't you offer him something for the land? I'm sure you would have allowed him to stay on his farm?"

"Yes, well, that season hit us all quite hard. She took quite a bit; I simply couldn't afford it at the time. And Lady Charlotte has never been easy to negotiate with. Never willing to talk. Just get straight to the deal, as it were. Oh dear, I do apologize! I keep forgetting you are a relation, and I really shouldn't speak ill of her to you."

"Or ever, really, so uncouth!" Abby teased. "You can leave speaking ill of Lady Charlotte to me." They laughed again.

"But," Abby continued, "in truth, it does weigh on you, doesn't it? That Lady Charlotte has grown her estate so aggressively and presses against yours. I daresay she is encroaching upon your lands so much, I even see you trotting onto Oakfield at least once a day!" She watched him from the corner of her eye.

"If you're referring to the time I spent hovering nearby, the truth is that I'd been meaning to apologize to you for some time. I just never quite knew how to put it into words."

He turned from her gaze ever so slightly. Abby could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Was Baron Conrad Wallen bashful at the thought of speaking to her? Like a schoolboy? It was almost endearing.

But it didn't fit, she thought, for him to seem so meek after acting so angry at their initial encounter. Perhaps he hadn't been there to size up his future wife, after all.

"But," she said and then paused. This wasn't easy to phrase; she had to be careful. "You might have saved yourself the trouble, had you behaved differently on our first meeting."

His face turned even redder, and he turned back to Abby at this. "It was only that I was unaware of your existence before that day. Was that not apparent?"

"Well, you seemed so determined to be there, to meet me. I thought perhaps everyone knew of my coming."

"I knew the Lady Charlotte was plotting something, but I was not anticipating the appearance of a mysterious heir."

"Plot? Please, Baron, explain yourself. I know that Lady Charlotte invited me to Oakfield Manor to inherit this estate, though everything I've seen, and the way I am treated – I can't understand why! What is the piece of the puzzle I am missing? What am I to her? And...well...what am I to you?"

At this, the baron slowed his horse and stopped, considering his words. "I cannot say for certain what goes on in the minds of others, especially one such as your aunt. But I will be honest. If Lady Charlotte, who is already quite advanced in years, were to die, and you were not to appear, then upon her passing the land would have no heir, and Oakfield would be available to anybody willing to pay for it. I have often asked to buy back my father's old lands, though she's turned down all of my requests. I was hoping to get the land back in time, but if you're here, that won't happen."

Except, Abby thought, if they married, in which case he would have gained Oakfield.

The baron stared at her intently. "There's one more thing. You speak of Lady Charlotte's indifference toward you, and I imagine you've been treated rather poorly since you came here. This does not surprise me. I cannot imagine why she would call the daughter of her sister, Lady Georgette Somerville, to this land, unless it were to hurt her in some way – forgive me for saying so – considering what went on between the sisters."

"You knew my mother?"

"I knew of her. I was not yet ten when she ran off with Mr. Greene. But I remember well enough, I suppose."

"And...and what happened? What did my mother do?"

At this, Baron Wallen smiled. “Well, isn’t it obvious, Abigail? She abandoned her sister, her estate, everything. Lady Charlotte cares only for the family status and Oakfield estate. She was furious when her sister fell in love with the village blacksmith, and she never forgave her for the betrayal. What’s more, Lady Georgette was never sorry, and she denied Lady Charlotte even the dignity of an apology.

“Consider your name, after all: Abigail. It’s Hebrew, and means, ‘In honor of the father.’ And while I’m sure the bearded men of ancient times were referring to the Almighty Father...well, I find it sweet that your mother would name her child in honor of the man who loved her.”

Those words. That smile. Abby hadn’t felt this warm in ages.



* * *

Abby leaped off the horse, tied it to a post in front of the stables, and rounded the corner towards the entrance to Oakfield Manor. She was expecting various servants to be performing their usual duties, but what she found was people standing about, conversing in small groups. They quieted down as Abby came near them but nobody moved to go about their tasks. It was certainly unusual, Abby thought. But what alarmed her was that Ellie was also outside, sitting down by the door not far from where they’d first met. She had her arms around her legs and her face pressed into her knees. Without hesitation, Abby trotted to her dearest handmaiden to check on her. She held the girl’s shoulder as gently as she could, snapping Ellie back into the world.

“Oh, M’Lady,” whimpered Ellie. “I don’t know if you’ve heard. Lady Charlotte, she was conducting meetings when she suddenly clutched at her chest and...”

“And what, Ellie?”

“They had to call for doctors. I’m not sure what is going on, though I’ve heard from some that it’s just her constitution finally giving out. There’s nothing to cure. It’s just her time! The lady of

the house! Oh, she's dying!"

"I see," replied Abby. Her eyes stared off into the distance. This was indeed a sudden change of affairs – and one she had not expected – at least not right this moment. If she was going to have the conversation she'd planned to have with Lady Charlotte, she would have to have it now.

She turned left at the entrance, went down the hall, took a right, went up the fine stairway, and went into Lady Charlotte's bedchamber without knocking or asking permission. She requested the doctors leave them to speak alone for a time, as they were only standing about, finding nothing they could do. Abby knew there was no time to waste.

Everything in Lady Charlotte's private chambers was very fine. There were exotic decorations from countries and cultures Abby didn't recognize. The dressing chair and bed were draped in the finest silks and the most expensive furs. The headboard was inlaid with pewter and ebony. But like the rest of Oakfield Manor, the wealth did not disguise the emptiness, the lack of a personal touch. Everything here was expensive. Nothing was loved.

And there, in the center of the dark bed was a grim, pale version of the lady she had barely met but just today had come to understand: the Lady Charlotte. The clean white bedsheets and covers made it seem as if her graying figure was ready to float away into eternal light. How fitting, Abby mused.

"Well," said Lady Charlotte weakly, "you're certainly in a hurry to see me. That's a first."

"I did not realize until I arrived that your time was short." Abby spoke as calmly and correctly as she could manage. "And so I suppose I must be quick about it. Are you truly dying?"

"I feel it is so."

"But you have known this for some time, and that is why my coming here was imperative to you."

"Indeed. You are my only heir."

"But you have made no arrangements for my betrothal, nor have you introduced me to any eligible young men."

"An intelligent woman has no need of a husband."

"Perhaps that is so, but I believe you quite specifically do not wish for me to marry Baron Conrad Wallen."

At this, the lady collected enough of her remaining strength to open her eyes wide and turn to look directly at Abby. "Ah," she

rasped, and her smile was ironic. "I was hoping you would never understand my intentions. But I suppose it's to the credit of the Somerville family line that you did, so there is no shame in that."

Abby knew there was no going back now. "You knew that if you died without an heir, with me here, life would go on. But what mattered to you most was not what happened to your affairs, but rather, what final blows you could deliver. You wanted to own as much of the land in Shropshire as possible, and so you took as much of the Wallen estate as you could. But you knew that, after your passing, if there was no legal heir to the estate, then the young baron could just get it all back. That's why you brought me here, and why you took such glee in introducing me to him on my first day. You wanted him to know that, for another generation, everything you took from him would not be his!"

The lady, hearing every word, smiled.

"And what's more," continued Abby, "you also struck a final blow against my parents! I sent letter after letter to my father, and Gillis only today revealed that he never sent any of them! Oh, what my father must think of his dear daughter, cutting him out of her life like that! After he took your sister, you ensured he would lose the only family he had left! As far as he knows, I have abandoned him for all this...this dreary cave!

"And then there is me. You never wrote to the Pendletons at all. You read all my letters – that's how you knew about Rebecca and Eugene! You deliberately encouraged me to seek vengeance against them. You didn't care if they were caught or let go for my sake. You just wanted me to know what it felt like to use power, the power of wealth and authority, to crush an enemy! You wanted me to feel vengeful!

"And I could never understand why you acted this way, why you would hate me so. Until I came to understand what that word – hate – truly means. Your schemes are not committed with personal interest, like Rebecca's, or with vain delusion like the Pendletons'. You simply hate. Where your sister found love, where all others around you find love, you have none, so you foster a sick, twisted desire to right the universe around you by living a life of hate. That's why everyone in your employ lives a hollow life in your presence. With your last breath, your desire is to hurt everyone: Baron Wallen, your sister, her husband, their only child! Because you hate so much, all you wish is for hate, hate, HATE!"

Lady Charlotte turned her eyes towards the ceiling as if staring into the future. “I never found love,” she finally responded. “No man was good enough for me, as far as my father was concerned. To think Georgette found a way around that old man by cheating and shirking her life here altogether.”

“Was he still alive by then?” asked Abby.

“No. But, as you so eloquently put it: that old man’s bitterness – and yes, hatred, still lived in me.”

Her every breath was shallower than the last. To Abby, it seemed that she wasn’t very long for this world now.

The lady continued, “And as for you...yes, child, I wanted you to know what it felt like to win over your enemy. It is righteous, and if you had that strength in you, then perhaps I could have kept a family tradition going.” She paused, and Abby wondered if she would continue. “There’s no reason why, after everything I’ve lived through, I shouldn’t be allowed to win in the end.”

“Was it worth it, Countess?”

“I shall never know.”

Abby leaned over the bed, ensuring that the lady would be able to see her fully. “And what if,” Abby countered, “I told you that there is, in this world, one thing that proved you wrong. The very thing that, of all people, Baron Wallen reminded me of today?”

What little breath remained in the lady’s lungs escaped her lips in a defiant snicker. “Are you so sure?” she asked. “The young baron stands to gain all of Oakfield, if only he can convince a foolish blacksmith’s daughter that he loves her.” With one more ugly smile, Lady Charlotte Somerville closed her eyes. Her narrow frame seemed to sink into the mattress.

And at that moment, Countess Abigail Somerville inherited Oakfield Manor.



* * *

Abby stood looking out over the farmland outside the high walls of Oakfield. The farmlands, by now, had stored or sold their crops,

leaving wide open empty fields of sharp, short stalks covered in the slightest crisp frost. Farther away, the trees of the surrounding forest had lost most of their leaves and extended bare branches to the sky. The sun would set soon, and there might even be snow during the night. She hoped not, nobody wanted the weather to be too cold the night of the harvest festival. But it would be warm enough with everybody celebrating. Abby knew these details didn't really matter; she was worried about other things.

All the important details were already handled, so all that remained was to stand in front of the populace and announce her decision. Looking out at the main road she saw Baron Wallen approaching, and she knew that this announcement was not all that remained. No, there was one last, very important detail, and it concerned the baron.

"Ah, Countess!" he remarked as he got close enough to speak easily. "I never thought there would come a time I could address a Lady of Oakfield with that title and find myself pleased to do so."

"Thank you for coming out to see me, Baron Wallen," replied Lady Abigail. "I trust you are not abandoning your own locals to be here with me?"

"For you, my lady, I can always spare the time. And it's Conrad, if you recall."

He dismounted and disappeared through the gate, emerging a moment later next to her on the wall.

"Are you heading into the hall?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Abby. "I have some announcements to make to the people of Oakfield, and this seemed the best way to address the majority. And to spread the word."

"My lady, I find myself more intrigued every time you get a chance to reveal yourself. The former countess, may she rest her soul, never wished to have anything to do with the common folk. You are a different breed indeed. You really care about the people, don't you?"

"I don't know what 'breed' you find me to be, Baron – Conrad – but last I checked, I am as much 'the people' as any of them. It was only earlier this year I would have been sweeping the floors of that hall."

"Oh, please don't misunderstand me, good lady! I truly care about the people who depend on me, as well. I simply mean to say, I don't think, in your shoes, I could join them in such festivities. Not

for lack of wanting to, mind you. But, well, my pedigree and all. I do make some people feel awkward around me. I daresay I would ruin the dance if my mere presence forced everyone to stop and bow.”

“You should give them more credit. It’s been my experience that, given the opportunity, people will treat you as you treat them.” Abby looked out at the village, quiet now, but soon to be bustling. “In any case, I must indeed address the people here. There will be changes, and it will be easier for them to hear this from me.”

“Well,” smiled the baron, cocking his head towards her in a manner that made her heart melt, “under your capable stewardship, I’m sure they’ll be able to handle anything.”

“Not my stewardship,” Abby countered. “The alderman’s.”

“...the...what?”

“That is what I am to tell them. I have already spoken to the alderman. A municipal council will rule in my stead. They can manage the estate’s daily matters as well as anybody.”

“So you will simply luxuriate at Oakfield Manor?”

“I am donating that draughty old thing to the church. I intend to live in Mersey Chapel, where I grew up.”

“...ah, a summer home, to enjoy your position from a beautiful, flowing hillside of...”

“I don’t want the money. I plan to send most of it back to the town, and use some of it to support my ailing father. As for the title of countess,” she pursed her lips at the thought, “I would revoke it immediately if that would do any good. But as the alderman explained to me, not having the protection of a family name in this area does put a community at risk, so Abigail Somerville will remain countess.”

“Even if she doesn’t remain here?” Conrad’s eyes narrowed and his tone was grim. Abby knew it wasn’t a real question, more of an accusation. And to her ears, a pained one.

It pained her, too. “Yes, that’s right.”

The air grew chillier as the sun continued to set. Abby didn’t want to be selfish, but, oh, she wished that Conrad would do something to warm it, instead of turning his gaze towards his shoes while perpetuating this sad silence.

She would be the one to break it. “Baron,” she stammered, “... Conrad. Conrad, I’m sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize, my dear lady,” he said kindly, “for you have not done anything wrong, unless choosing your destiny is something for which you should be blamed. My silence is simply due to regret. I thought I had more time. I should have told you – instead of speaking about the forest and local gossip – I should have taken a moment to say to you that...that I...well, that I love you. Yes, I, dare to say that is true. When I first saw you, you seemed so powerless under the glare of the former countess, and since then you have changed so much. Not only through your position, but how you use it to make all those around you happier. It is so rare to meet somebody who wishes such kindness upon others. A person such as you are is worth cherishing forever.”

If Abby could have cast aside every decision she had been making, she would have done it right then and there, if only to wrap her arms around this man who made her feel so good. It took everything she was to stand there and not do so, but her aunt’s words echoed in the back of her mind: *The young baron stands to gain all of Oakfield, if only he can convince a foolish blacksmith’s daughter that he loves her.*

“I thank you so much for those sweet words, Conrad,” Abby answered, shivering, finding it so hard to look into his eyes. “They mean more to me than you may know. And I hope you understand that it really was your words that saved me. You speak of me as if I grew stronger, more independent. And perhaps there is truth to that. But I think of the kitchen staff at my former job, holding my arm to steady my strength. I think of neighbors bringing me kidney pies and gossip when I was at my lowest. And all I can say to you is that there is also truth in the love of those around you being the ones who make you who you are. When Lady Charlotte called for me, she almost won her twisted game; she tried to fill me with a spirit of hatred. I came here not knowing what to expect, and if I had given in to her desire to fester in hatred, then I would never, as you claim, have grown at all! It is only through love that a life can truly be worth living. And I must acknowledge that that was what I was gaining in Mersey Chapel. What I began to find before I made the mistake of coming here.

“I do not wish for you to misunderstand me; I shall ensure that people like Ellie, and Gillis – all the employees of the Manor – will have their burdens eased. So in that respect, I have no regrets about coming to Shropshire. But if I am honest and wise, then I must

acknowledge that, following the command of Lady Charlotte to come here, away from what my mother had grown herself, was my first mistake. And it is a mistake I intend to correct.”

“If it is any consolation, dear Conrad, I beg you to understand. I would have been the coldest villain here, if you hadn’t reminded me what it feels like to love. For what it’s worth, I love you, too.”

Abby waited in silence for his response, half expecting him to turn cold. She was sure he would turn away.

But when the silence was broken yet again, he said, “I don’t deny that I wish you would stay. However, I see why you must not.” With a bow, he turned and began to walk away. As he emerged from the gate beneath where she stood, he looked up. “Mersey Chapel, you said?”

“Yes...”

“Yes.” And with a flickering smile, he began the long walk back to his own estate.

Abby watched until he disappeared. Then, and only then, did she make her way towards the hall.

Chapter Seven

Mersey Chapel
January 1814

The nice day was a rare occurrence this winter. Most of the time, the air was frigid and filled with biting sleet carried by a sharp wind that cut through everything but the heaviest of clothes. But not today. For the first time in a very long time, the day was mild and lit by bright sunlight in the still air. The view high above had only a few fluffy clouds in a blue sky. Sparkling little snowflakes floated gently to the world below. Like crystals, they glittered white and silver as they drifted in the air.

Abby Greene appreciated every glistening snowflake, particularly after such a cold and blustery winter. Although her head was protected by a crimson chapeau, she wore her golden blonde hair long and loose below it whenever she could, especially on days like this. When she spun around, her blonde hair caught the rays of sunshine and caused everything around her to glow and today she danced surrounded by crystal snowflakes, making everything seem so perfect, so magical. No matter how much the winter beat her down, a perfect day like this one made all the struggle worthwhile.

She held onto that lesson – make every blessed moment count – and promised herself she would never forget it.

It was late morning, and she was walking at the north end of Mersey Chapel. She knew she was making a bit of a spectacle of herself, but it was hard to contain her enjoyment. Everyone knew her in Mersey Chapel, and everybody would see her – this young lady with her golden hair, her red chapeau and coat, her furred boots, spinning pleasantly down the road, grinning straight into the sky. What must they think of me, she sometimes wondered.

No matter, she knew the people here were good. Either they were old friends who remembered her from their youthful days, and understood that she was a kind and loving sort, gentle and caring to her friends, and certainly undeserving of scorn or criticism, or they

were the parents of such people, who remembered the little lady who grew up in the house of the blacksmith, and welcomed the sight of her. Abby knew her hamlet, and trusted the people not to mock or deride her free spirit.

And secondly, even if there was a vindictive or cruel streak within any of them – which she doubted – well, even if there were, she couldn't care less what they thought. She was ever so happy these days.

All with good reason. About this time last year, she was tolerating a life of servitude to a wicked family, the Pendletons – the former masters and landowners of Mersey Chapel. And then she had gone to live with her aunt, only to find another life of bitterness and cruelty. She was grateful to be back among her own people, where it seemed wealth and privilege had not tainted the hearts of the people. These were her family and friends, and they knew her.

It hadn't been an easy decision to leave Oakfield Manor, where she could have lived the life of a pampered countess.

She stopped spinning, first and foremost because she needed, eventually, to get to her destination. She was also dizzy, and was at risk of falling down. Surely, the town would have a right laugh then!

Mersey Chapel's post office was on the north side of the village. In truth, Mersey Chapel was not a large enough hamlet for a proper post office (nor many businesses, as a matter of fact) and so one family, the Loomers, agreed to receive a small pay in exchange for receiving and handing out the mail. It was certainly a nice arrangement for the family. They got a few extra shillings, and rarely any mail to actually deal with.

Abby liked the arrangement as well. Tawny Loomer was so uninterested in actually carrying mail that most people ended up having to trek to her home to get it. Abby liked visiting old friends. Any excuse to get out of the house once in a while was a welcome respite.

A quick knock on the door, and Abby waited on the front step, bouncing between the balls and heels of her feet. The cry came from within, "Just a moment, I'm coming, I'm coming!"

Abby peered up the toad to the north and saw a figure riding over the hill towards Mersey Chapel. He was dressed finely, even a little...aristocratically. But, no, it was too early for Connie's visit! But, she thought, maybe he was sweet enough to surprise her.

“Oh. You.” Tawny grumbled when she saw Abby on her doorstep, jarring her back into reality from her gazing out of town. “Well, get on in, then. Don’t let the heat out.” Abby stepped into the front hall. Tawny made no attempt at decorum and marched back off into the house. She was an old acquaintance of Abby’s. Tawny had learned her mother’s textile trade, and then got married to a young man. Her apparent animosity didn’t indicate any problems between them; it was only that the Loomers had gotten used to getting a little extra pay for practically nothing. A letter here, an order there, but, honestly, in a hamlet this tiny, no real work at all. Until Abby fell in love, of course.

And then the letters wouldn’t stop.

Abby knew Tawny would be back with a package, but she wondered whom she had seen on the road. Unable to resist, she followed Tawny into her parlor and made a beeline straight for the north-facing window, ignoring Tawny who was fetching her package off a shelf.

“What on...” started Tawny, as Abby rather ungraciously charged through her house towards the window.

“Oh, please, do forgive me,” interrupted Abby, pulling the window shade aside. “I don’t mean to intrude. It’s just that I saw somebody coming into town, and I thought, it might be...oh, I see...”

The figure was still a fair distance from the house, and it was a gentleman dressed finely. But at this distance, Abby could see clearly that it was the only other man she knew who would come to Mersey Chapel dressed so officially: Mr. McCreadie, the local magistrate. The last time she saw him was almost a year ago, when he was the man who had the unfortunate task of reporting to Abby that she had lost her money – and her beau. Because he had done so in order to save her from the ire of the accusatory Pendletons, it was hard to remember him with anything but gratitude.

What business had he in Mersey Chapel? Abby wondered. Perhaps he was doing some late holiday visiting.

“What, what are you looking ‘fer?” asked Tawny.

“Well... no, I thought somebody I recognized was coming in, but, well, it’s just Mr. McCreadie.”

“Teh! ‘somebody I recognized,” teased her friend. She knew full well what sort of letters Abby had been receiving, and what sort of gentleman visitor would make her run across a house. She also

knew the teasing would make Abby blush with embarrassment, the barest revenge she could get for making her collect all her letters. "Well, no, no letters for you today. Although there was a mail-order package for you. I take it you know all about it, then?"

"Oh, yes indeed!" Abby exclaimed. "Thank you, I've been waiting for that!" She accepted the package and then realized that they were not alone. Tawny's little daughter, a dark-haired darling that looked just like her father, had somehow quietly snuck in the room (though, Abby realized, the way she had stormed in, maybe the girl was always there and Abby simply didn't notice), and was now staring at Abby while hiding behind her mother's dress.

"Hello," said Abby kindly.

The little one dug her face harder into the back of her mother's leg.

"Don't mind her," said Tawny. "She's just at a shy age."

Indeed, she did seem like she was about four years old. Goodness, Abby thought, maybe even five by now! Abby and Tawny were roughly the same age, both turning twenty-two later this year. How old had her friend been when she became a mother? thought Abby. Or, for that matter, when she married?

"Well," said Tawny, jarring Abby out of her daydreams once more, "you got what you came for. Now, you already traipsed snow in my house, don't wait around to see whether or not it melts."

Abby bid a hasty goodbye, and out she went. One last look behind her after she was out the door, and she saw that the shy little girl, so desperate to hide her face in her mother's skirt, was now enthusiastically waving to her.

Abby waved back and walked away, knowing her friend was only teasing. But, even if she weren't, all the pointed words in the world couldn't affect her these days. The reason she'd run to the window was love. The reason Tawny kept getting more of her letters was – mostly – love. The reason she could dance in the snow was – more than anything – love. A love that went by the rather debonair name of Baron Wallen. And also responded to Connie – though only for her. She giggled.

During her time at Oakfield Manor last summer, Abby had learned quite a lot. Most of her lessons had been rather harsh, and she would not soon forget them. She now knew of the sorrow in living a life determined by hatred, and how finding love could save a cold soul. And for Abby, she felt that finding Connie was what

saved her. A man who pursued her but never made her feel chased. Rather, he listened to her, enlightened her, respected her – even, and perhaps especially, when he learned she was leaving Oakfield Manor.

She was so glad she had plucked up the courage to write to him as soon as she had come back to Mersey Chapel, for it was only days later that he returned to her side. And, from that moment, the town couldn't stop talking about them. It was little more than gossip, of course – Abby and Connie rarely gave them anything to talk about. They could not sneak off; instead, they spent their time in full sight of (indeed, surrounded by) the community.

Of course, everyone knew that Abby's mother had been a fine lady, but because Georgette had been the blacksmith's wife and had come to behave much the same as everyone else, they accepted her. So when Abby grew up and left Mersey Chapel, the older villagers knew why that would be. Perhaps, Abby thought, she was the only one who had been shocked at the discovery.

So now that a handsome nobleman was calling, most of the villagers were delighted. However, they had no idea that Abby was the Countess of Oakfield, and Abby wanted to keep it that way.

As Abby walked through the empty town market just as heavy snow clouds began to block the sun, she looked down at her package and realized she wasn't hiding the truth particularly well, from Tawny at least. After all, she corresponded with Baron Wallen often, but not all her mail came from him. Maybe Tawny and her husband were so fed up with the mass of letters written to Abby that they simply threw them in a pile and didn't pay attention who was writing her, or to whom she wrote. Often, it was to the alderman of Oakfield, and that town's various charities and property managers. Sometimes even to London.

After all, a countess's work was never done.

She wondered how long it would be before her secret came out. She didn't look forward to that day.

Abby had friends here, people who cared about the young lady who had grown up with them, struggled with them. They were all so sympathetic when she'd suffered under the Pendletons, horrible people who, simply because of their official position, were able to command fear and deference in the community. Nobody liked them, but they were treated with authority all the same. Simply for their titles, for their name.

Abby wondered whether the people who knew her, who'd grown up with her, would treat her differently if they knew she was a countess. Would they fear her? Worse, would they feel that their affection and sympathy had been unwarranted? Most of all, Abby feared losing the bond she shared with them. For instance, last spring, her neighbor Mrs. Tillery had brought her fresh, warm kidney pies to help lift her spirits after she lost her dear suitor at the time. What would Mrs. Tillery do, if she were to ever learn Abby was a countess? Would she feel self-conscious about her average pies? Would she start to avert her face, and never look Abby in the eye again? Would she be afraid?

Abby shook her head. Nobody from Mersey Chapel would ever be allowed to treat Abby as if she were different. She hoped she would always be treated as one of them – and she would keep her life as a countess a secret. They would only know her as a local girl.

As she believed herself to be.

As far as Abby was concerned, they could go on chattering about how she had somehow wooed some lovely rich boy from Shropshire with her song and a gleam in her eye. She thought such rumors were humorously complimentary – as if she really could bewitch men with but a wag of a finger or some other nonsense. Whatever made them laugh, or even tease her for her mounds of correspondence. Whatever made them look at her, and treat her, as one of them. Here she was among family.

But there was still the work. Most of her earnings she simply fed back into Oakville through the alderman, so she had to ensure those legal transfers were documented and signed – and approved in London, of course. A little, she kept for her father to live an easier life in his winter years. (He was the one who had saved his dear wife, her mother, from a life of bitterness and hate. Abby believed he'd earned every penny.) Some of the money – very little, she ensured – made her home life better in various small ways.

Like the package she carried in her hands at that moment, for which she had eagerly awaited. "Cream of tartar," they called it. Abby thought only the good Lord could know where Tartar was, because she certainly hadn't the faintest idea. Somewhere in France, probably. All the same, it was a leavening agent, one that would hopefully make her breads richer and fluffier! Abby found herself rounding the corner towards her home. She heard the pounding of the hammer on the anvil and made her way into the forge.

"Hello, Father," she said, and then noticed that it was young Owen sitting at the station, hammer and tongs at the ready.

Owen was the blacksmith's latest apprentice; he had come to replace Eugene, the former apprentice, who had made off with Abby's savings. Owen was younger and very sweet, and though he had certainly built some muscle studying under her father at the forge, she would always remember him as that frail little boy who, only last spring, had so much trouble catching his breath after running up the hill to find her. Abby could only feel gratitude for Owen's presence. He made her father's life easier, to be certain.

"Oh," said Owen, surprised to see her. "Your father said he needed to sit. He's in the house."

Abby felt a tightness in her chest. It used to be quite hard to pull her father away from the forge. He never "needed" to sit. Not until recently.

"Thank you, Owen," she said, and she made her way back out and around to the house. She caught a glimpse of the magistrate entering the neighbors' house before heading indoors herself.

The room was silent, even though her father was within. In his rocking chair, he sat as still as stone in that warm winter room. He looked so peaceful, Abby thought, it would be mean to shake him from his rest. He looked so thin and frail these days, he seemed so much older than he used to. She needed to shake him, if for no other reason, then to shake some life back into him. To make him vibrant.

Like she always knew him to be. Before this.

"Father?"

His eyes sprang open at her voice; she knew as well as he did that he wouldn't miss any opportunity to spend time with her. She meant everything to him.

"Ah, Abby. You missed the fun. A new record. I spent only 25 minutes with that boy in the forge before feeling completely useless, and decided to reward myself with a break. Pretty soon, he'll be so good at smithing I can cut to the chase and come straight back in for a nap."

"Father, you can teach him how to hammer, but only he can teach himself to work independently. I daresay if you weren't there, he wouldn't know where to get permission to get started."

He laughed. "So where have you been? Off to write to Ol' Tursley, tell him to get to work?"

"I could be standing next to him and he wouldn't obey. He's hardworking in his own way. Just not in any way that makes change, I suppose. No, no, I went to get something special I ordered. I think it will make the bread we bake here like nothing you could dream!"

"Oh. Cream of tartar."

Abby wasn't sure whether she was mystified or just annoyed. "How, how do you..."

"Well," he responded, tapping the package in Abby's hands, "it's about the right size, and you mentioned baking. I figured."

"But...that's still so...specific!"

"Well now," the old man said with a twinkle in his eye, "your mother knew about all these lovely things coming out of France. She had some of that. She used to bake the fluffiest loaves as well. You're very..." a long pause followed.

"Very, what?"

"Well, you're very like your mother. It's the way you spin in the snow, the way you smile. You're so beautiful, but you never act like you're anything more than part of our lives. I guess...I'm sorry, just the ramblings of nostalgia."

Abby couldn't answer. Holding his bony hand, she wished she were still small enough to climb into his lap.

"I will say this, too," her father continued. "God rest her soul in heaven. But the way I used to feel when your mother looked at me, as if I saved her...I daresay I know how that boy of yours must feel."

Abby would have collapsed into his arms and embraced him, if not for the faint sound of a cry, like a wolf mother howling into the moon.

"Father? Do, do you hear..."

With some effort, he hoisted himself from his seat. "It's coming from the Tillerys'."

They both hurried to the door. Outside, they could see Mr. McCreadie, his face flushed, and obviously in some distress because he didn't know what to do about Mrs. Tillery.

The woman had just burst from her home and collapsed upon her front step, weeping loud enough to wake the dead.



* * *

Abby finished putting the final designs on the top of the buns. Artisanal pictures never worked for her – the rising and baking of the loaves always obscured them in some manner – so instead, she cut pleasant swirls and cross stitches into the top of the bread. It was simple enough, but somehow, she felt the children would see that they were unique and interesting, even in this little way, and perhaps they would appreciate that somebody had put the effort into these treats for them. She hoped they would enjoy it.

Abby sighed. In truth, she knew she had no idea what would help now. At first, she'd thought she would cook something nice for Mrs. Tillery. Maybe even a kidney pie! It was, after all, almost a year since Mrs. Tillery had made one for her to brighten her spirits after the loss and deception of Eugene. It would have been poetic, Abby thought. Giving back to the woman who helped her so kindly, almost a year later, in the same way.

Then Abby remembered what she was helping with, and her spirits dropped at how ridiculous such a notion seemed.

Abby had lost an attractive boy who ran away.

Mrs. Tillery had lost her son. He died.

All the kidney pies in the world wouldn't fix that. Abby couldn't think of any condolence that ever could. Warm words? Kind hugs? Of course, she and her father offered them as soon as they could. They would provide them often, over the next few days. But it felt small, weak, compared to the awesome reality of life and death. Abby knew that, if money could somehow buy back a soul, she would gladly have surrendered her fortune in Oakfield, thrown away her entire wealth as a countess, if it meant bringing back the dead and helping to mend the bleeding heart of her family friend. Except it couldn't. All the money in the world couldn't bring back a boy. Nothing could.

So, if she could do nothing to fix the tragedy that had befallen poor Mrs. Tillery, then it was the children on which she would focus. They were certainly saddened by the passing of their eldest

brother, although children had a strange and unique resiliency and willingness to press on in life. At the very least, occupying their time, even in some small way, would give a rest to their mother, who badly needed it.

Hence, fun bread buns. Abby was a wealthy countess, and this was all she could do.

A knock came on the door. Abby was in the middle of placing the buns into the oven, so her father went to answer it.

“Ah, Baron Wallen! How happy we are for your visit!” Abby couldn’t have leaped across the house faster.



* * *

“Who was the boy? What was his name?” Baron Wallen called from the other room.

Abby was back at the stove, heating a bit of water and readying some finely ground tea leaves. It was almost ready now, though the buns needed more time, by the look of them. Once the water was just right, she poured it into a pot. “Randal. My neighbor’s son.” It felt awkward speaking of the dead from across the room. What if Mrs. Tillery had somehow heard?

At least Conrad had good manners. He refrained from asking any more questions until Abby was back in the main room. With a ready pot and a pair of earthen mugs, she set the little table between them. “He was the eldest,” she continued, once she finally could look in his eyes again.

“I saw the shades drawn, and black curtains over the door.”

Funeral arrangements were being made for their dear friend and Mrs. Tillery’s lost son. But though nobody would speak of it so bluntly, most wanted to know about another family. Gavin’s family.

“I don’t feel anybody has any ready answers, Connie. It’s... become somewhat more complicated than a simple funeral.”

“Indeed? I do hope more tragedy won’t befall the poor lady.”

Abby’s heart warmed. Conrad had always cared about the general well-being of the people who lived in his constituency in

Shropshire, and that empathy extended even to strangers. He was a tender, caring man, and she was lucky to have him here. She smiled ever so briefly before hiding it again. It wasn't a time for smiling these days.

"No, no, nothing like that. It's just, well, there is another boy, Gavin. He isn't a Tillery, he isn't one of theirs. But, see..." She trailed off a bit, wondering how much Connie had known about local news. She asked, "Do you know why Randal Tillery was sent away in the first place?"

"No."

"He had come of age not too long ago. When England needed soldiers."

"Ahh," came the drawn-out response from the baron. He sank into his chair ever so slightly, his whole frame exhausted. Across the channel, France's Napoleon had begun campaigns to rule much of Europe, conquering in every direction. Why, when Abby was a schoolgirl, her own homeland would have been rampaged by his armies, if the British navy hadn't trounced them at Cape Trafalgar. All these years later, and they were still going strong, taking lads away to various corners of the world in the name of God and King. Mersey Chapel was not immune to these affairs. Every so often, a recruitment officer would come asking for young men to prove their value and fight for Mother England in whatever conflict threatened her this year. Many young men Abby had known did go off to war, and they came back, sometimes fine, sometimes crushed in body or spirit, but always with stories of the French armies that were invading nations in every corner of the continent.

Surely, Connie's own townsfolk regaled him with such adventures as well. There wasn't a hamlet in England where somebody hadn't gone off to war.

"There are boys who went from here," Abby continued. "Most came back. They talked, we listened – it was the easiest way to learn news of the world. But a few years back, two boys left. One was poor Randy Tillery. The other was Gavin Cork. The other day, Mr. McCreadie came to tell Mrs. Tillery that Randy had been killed." She shook her head. "I wouldn't wish that pain on anybody. It was such awful news that, well, we could be forgiven for almost not noticing that Gavin Cork returned one day later."

"And what did he have to say?" said Connie, on the edge of his seat.

Abby pursed her lips. "Well that's the thing," she finally answered. "Nothing at all! He came back alone. I'm told he came back with no fanfare of any kind. A dear old schoolmate of mine, William, said he caught sight of him coming in, dressed rather shabbily, like he had slept in the wild for weeks. He didn't acknowledge anybody, never greeted a soul. He just went straight to his family home."

Connie thought briefly before answering. "Unusual. Unsociable, to be sure. But it's not a crime to wish to go straight home, particularly after what he must have been through."

By now, the tea had steeped. Abby poured her beau a cup. "Fair enough," she answered, "but with Randal dead, we couldn't help but wonder what happened in Europe. Those two boys were friends. Randal, rest his soul, cannot tell us what happened, but Gavin could. But with nary a tale or condolence, he's just hiding at his parents' home, refusing any visitors or questions. I heard he'll have nothing to do with Randy's funeral, either!"

"And the magistrate," asked the baron, setting his cup in the saucer. "He had no news?"

"Either he kept the details of Randal's death private for the family's sake – or perhaps more likely – he knows as much as any of us." She glanced at the window. It was dusk, and whatever pleasant sun and mild weather had come to the town a week earlier had now gone, leaving only the sleet of winter to blow upon the land. "I can't help but feel that poor, dear Gavin is hiding something. And, though he does not wish to speak of it, dear Mrs. Tillery deserves answers. She should be able to lay her son to rest and be at peace."

She looked up and their eyes met. He frowned, and Abby knew just what Connie was feeling. She felt it too – no matter her power or her wealth, there were some problems she could not solve, and burdens she could not ease.

"Well," he said, "I do apologize. I came here under joyous tidings, and that seems inappropriate now. I shouldn't bring it up at all, really, but I'd have to carry this back."

He motioned to a gift box he'd had under his chair the entire time.

Abby nearly spat out her tea in surprise. "Oh! I'm so sorry! Please, I should have noticed! I know, I know, there is quite a lot going on these days, but, goodness! You obviously came with intent, and I scarcely gave it any notice at all! Oh, I'm, terribly

sorry!”

“Oh Abby,” the baron replied, “how flustered you’ve become! A heart as big and beautiful as yours, I would never expect you to stop worrying about others. Please, I should never have brought it up, really.”

“What is it? What have you thought?”

“An idea of sorts.” He handed her the package. “Open it.”

Perplexed, she tore at the wrapping and opened a small carrying case within. And inside that...

She had seen them in pictures – drawings, in her schoolgirl days – though she had never seen a real pair. But knew what winter magic they meant. “They’re ice skates!”

“Yes,” replied Connie. “But the real gift was where you were going to use them. You see, from time to time when it is very cold, the Thames in London freezes over. People go out onto the river, folks of all kinds, to glide and play. There are little shops and marketeers that pop up to sell candies and warm cider.

“I wanted to surprise you, to make this a special adventure, just for the two of us. It occurred to me that you might enjoy seeing London. There, a countess could learn all about what has happened in the wars with Napoleon – surely the military in London would be willing to inform a countess of important foreign affairs.”

Abby dropped the skates on the floor, threw her arms around his neck and kissed this wonderful man.

She would have kissed him far longer and harder, had she not smelt the buns burning.



* * *

Outside of Oxford, England
Late January 1814

Abby’s father was a romantic at heart. He would never have fled Oakfield Manor with Abby’s mother in tow if he weren’t.

He knew Baron Wallen was honorable. And he could see how

lively Abby had become with him in her life. It made him happy to see her bloom. Abby thought it made him feel stronger. Breathe easier.

She also knew that the most liberal father in the world would never allow his single young daughter to spend days traveling in a carriage alone with a man before rooming in lively London. She didn't even bother to try to convince him.

Rather, when she made the proposition, she explained that it would be Countess Abigail, Baron Wallen...and their retinue of handmaidens and servants. He had accepted without reservation.

Abby thought back to when she'd first told her father about the trip. He had smiled fondly and trusted her implicitly.

It was very hard not to love that man. She hoped he wouldn't miss her too much.

She was beside herself with excitement. The thought of spending time, any time, with Connie gave her a warm feeling in the depth of her belly. And an exquisite trip to metropolitan London, hand in hand with this charming man would be a romantic one she could hold in her happiest memories forever. Abby knew, of course, that she and Connie saw each other all the time, in the grand scheme of things. Thus, a trip to London, the more she thought of it, perhaps came off as a bit much. But – and it made her ever so slightly ashamed to know it – she couldn't help herself of late! When she was with Connie, she only wanted to stare endlessly at his pretty eyes and his sweet smile. And when he left, her first thoughts were about when he would be back. She couldn't stop thinking of him and how happy their lives could be together.

It was only last year she had accepted that she would never be loved. That she would never feel this way again.

Perhaps that's why her father had noticed the change in her, she thought. Why he believed in her so. Because, in them, he could see love.

"It probably reminds him of his wife, like." Ellie, her handmaiden from Oakfield Manor, said. Ellie had a habit of adding little information to any conversation, and yet so much heart. Abby loved hearing her voice.

Strictly speaking, Abby had not lied to her father. She and the baron had invited servants to come with them on the trip. It's just that perhaps she had allowed him to believe it was to be large retinue, perhaps larger than what she knew would be available. And

maybe, two people, by definition, are not *not* a retinue. And it just so happened that, at least for her part, her handmaiden would be Ellie, a dear trusted friend, who would more than likely leave her and the baron alone if she ever asked, and...

...and Abby had to get her father something very, very nice while in London.

At Ellie's comment, Abby turned to look at her. They were both in their shifts, readying themselves for bed at an expensive inn just outside of Oxford, on their way to London. She knew the dear girl was younger than herself, though not by much. By now she would be seventeen or so. Eighteen? She could manage a house full of boisterous farmers – her brothers and father – with great power and conviction, and yet somehow she still seemed like that small, mousy little girl she was when they'd first met. Women like that, Abby knew, so strong and yet so pure, were very rare, and to be treasured eternally. Abby couldn't dream of having any other lady on this trip with her. And she certainly trusted her words.

"In what way?" Abby asked inquisitively.

"Well," Ellie said, "You told me your father ran off with your mum? Nothing against your father, I'm sure he's the most honorable there is, but even he would've known you just don't go doing something so shocking unless you know there was nothing in the world you would ever wish to do more! I'm just saying maybe he wants you to be as happy as he was with your mum."

Abby smiled. "Well, for the record, it is officially a business trip. There are affairs I must conduct while in London. And I do hope you don't mind coming. You may be left on your own a few times while I sit in interviews that, don't fret, I am certain won't be too long."

"Oh, now, M'Lady, there is a Frost Fair. I find it hard to believe I won't have much to do!"

Abby turned away briefly to roll her eyes. She had asked Ellie not to call her "M'Lady" over a hundred times now. She continued to do so often. Whether it was because she was forgetful, simple, or deliberately endearing, Abby didn't know, and she had ceased wondering. Some battles weren't worth fighting.

Abby understood why Ellie did, of course. Strictly speaking, Ellie was still her private handmaiden. When Abby became Countess of Oakfield, that position was only further solidified. The fact that Abby spent all her time away from the county did not actually alter

her relationship to these people, no matter how much she would have wished otherwise. She would always be their countess, and Ellie's as well. Was it part of the problem, Abby wondered, that she paid Ellie a generous stipend? Being a laborer's daughter was not an easy life, Abby knew, and she couldn't bear the thought that Ellie was still living in that hut shoved up against the castle walls. Maybe, with the extra money, she could fix it up, or move to a nicer cottage. At the very least, she made it clear to Ellie she could reside in Abby's old quarters in the manor whenever she wished. More than anything, she hoped Ellie would understand that she wasn't a servant girl to her, but rather a friend. And, barring that, she wished Ellie could be happy and comfortable.

"Yes," Abby responded, "that does sound like fun."

"Have you been to London before?" Ellie asked.

"Me? No, no. But I have heard so much. I would never wish to leave Mersey Chapel, don't misunderstand me. But I did wish to know the wider world. What lay beyond the hills."

"Hmm. It will be quite the adventure. And you'll get to see it all with the baron! I can't say I'm not jealous. I would love to spend a happy memory with somebody I loved as well!"

"Well, I promise I'll explore with you a bit if you wish," said Abby. "Also, I guess you could try exploring with Lewis."

"Oh," responded Ellie, almost mournfully. "Oh, I daresay not. At least...well... no, that would not be right at all."

This was an interesting reaction, Abby thought. Abby had Ellie as her escort and Conrad knew he would need a companion at times as well, which was why he asked a boy named Lewis along. Abby didn't know Lewis. He lived somewhere on Connie's land, not in Oakfield. He was probably about Ellie's age, and seemed a nice enough lad, if a bit quiet.

Beyond that, she knew nothing of him. Ellie was a good judge of character, always seemed to have good instincts about others. So if she wasn't interested in Lewis as a person...Abby pressed, her curiosity piqued. "Really? Why is that? Do you know Lewis?"

"Oh, well, no, not really, M'Lady. I knew of him, like. But we never really ran in the same circles. I never really met him until this trip. I guess he's polite enough, sure, but he's...well...so distant! Like he's miles away, somewhere else. Barely talkative, y'know. The most I ever got out of him, I told him I wanted to try some of that frozen maple on crushed ice, like I heard they had up there, in that

Upper Canada. I wondered if the Frost Fair might have anything like it. I wanted to see all the people there, and the River Thames. I wanted to see all the lights they have on at night now – did you know they have light on all night long now! Lit by gases! It's a wonder the whole place hasn't blown sky-high! Well, sorry, what was I sayin'? Right, Lewis. I told him all this while we stopped to feed the horses. And he smiled a bit and cocked his head, and I thought I was gettin' through to him. And you know what he said to me, M'Lady?"

"What?"

"Well, he smiled, and somehow, looked all mournful like, at the same time, and he said, 'yes, I'm sure it'll all be worth it.' And I wanted to know what he meant, to clarify, like. And he just went back to starin' out the coach! Like, what's torturin' him so, he has to go ruin' it for everybody else! If he didn't want to come, I doubt anyone is forcing him to!"

Abby wondered. Conrad had chosen Lewis to come along. She trusted that he knew what he was doing. He cared about all his townsfolk, after all. "I guess we'll just have to trust that, whatever he's feeling, he'll be able to handle it himself. Especially if he's not interested in spending his time with a lovely young companion such as yourself." That last part, Abby threw in deliberately, seeing how Ellie was dwelling on the boy so much. Her comment, thankfully, had the effect of rousing her into embarrassment. "It could be worse," Abby added cheerfully. "Imagine if Connie invited Gillis!"

"Oh!" Ellie blurted as she lay in her bed and doused the light. "Well, that would be a torture then, now wouldn't it?"

"For everybody including him, I'm sure. I daresay he never liked me at Oakfield. I wonder if he did find anything he liked, now that he's out of Lady Charlotte's service."

"Last I checked, he plays cards."

"And?"

"And nothing. He just plays cards! Seems happy, though."

"Hmm. And old Tursley?"

"Sits around, eats carrots with the horses. Less grumpy."

"And my math instructor? Mr. Wells?"

"Misses you terribly. Says you were his best student."

"The alderman?"

"Hah! Tickled pink he is, not fer' nuthin', being as he is basically in charge. Just smiles and skips everywhere!"

“Ha! ...And your family?”

“Very grateful to you M’Lady. Very grateful indeed.”

“Good night, Ellie.”

“Good night, M’Lady.”

“Stop calling me that, Ellie.”



* * *

*River Thames, London, England,
February 1st, 1814*

The arrangements for what they were to do once they arrived in London were never set in stone. They planned to drop off their personal belongings at the hotel, and then perhaps visit the Horse Guards, where Abby could make preliminary inquiries into the affairs of the soldiery. It was a very dreary first day, Abby knew, but it was the right thing to do, given that she would like to help settle private matters related to people from her village.

However, they arrived in London after the sun had set. At this point, surely all the government officials would be gone from their offices. At any rate, the moment they approached the city, Ellie pressed her face up against the coach windows in slack-jawed amazement. The city, indeed, was lit quite brightly, even from this distance, even at this late hour. Abby knew it was due in large part to the oil lamps and hearth fires keeping everybody warm, but Ellie clearly hoped it was also thanks to the gas-fueled streetlamps. Abby and Conrad looked at each other. They knew it would be cruel, maybe even physically impossible, to wrench Ellie away from the Frost Fair now.

So, what other choice did they have, except to start the trip in the most pleasant way possible?

Once they exited the coach by the river, Conrad gave instructions to the driver to make his way to the hotel, arrange their rooms, bring in their luggage, and get himself something nice. Lewis was, of course, invited to accompany the baron, though the

young man respectfully requested he be released from such a charge, saying he didn't care much for cold weather and would rather head off to his own room. The baron couldn't admonish him for disliking the bitter cold, of course, though he did, as he later told Abby, regret that he had brought this boy all the way to London just to coop himself up in a room. Secretly, Abby thought it would be nice to spend quality time with Connie without too much outside interference.

"Too much" being the operative phrase, they realized, as they watched Ellie immediately leap off the river's edge and take a great slide along the ice, laughing frightfully all the way. The festivities had clearly begun.

The next several hours were bliss without compare. Unlike Ellie, Abby and Connie were more than happy to come down to the river gingerly, being careful not to slip and tumble. They had to hold hands, ensuring that one was always safe with the other. Reaching the middle of the river was like wandering into the center of a bazaar. Many tents were set up on the ice, where you could see the knickknacks being sold to tourists. There were beautiful chimes and small music boxes, finely painted tin toys and blocks for the children. Some tents were more practical, selling winter clothing of all colors and varieties. Abby loved the elegant varieties, with their thick animal furs and silken tailored bodices. She didn't notice Connie watching her as she marveled over the offerings until he wanted to buy her a ladies' beaver hat. Abby declined, saying it didn't seem very warm and was falling out of fashion anyway. (Although, in truth, it simply wasn't her preference.) There were women in Mersey Chapel who could knit most impressively and had fine skills in creating rather fetching French-style toques, very warm, very colorful, and comfortable as well. She saw a few here and there, though these were lined with furs and had brims on the front. She preferred the rustic, hand-made hats. And although the elegant dresses were certainly eye-catching, the affection poured into every decorated mitten and every playfully tasseled scarf was what drew her.

Sometimes, Abby didn't have to go to the tents to see what was going on. In this environment, the sellers would come to her. On more than one occasion, men and women, boys and girls, would go running or skating among the people all over the river, with boxes held in their arms, supported by lines tied behind their necks. And

each box they carried while gliding so effortlessly along the ice would hold small samples of everything imaginable. Some had pasties, little toys, or festive streamers. Some – the speedier ones, Abby noticed – wouldn't sell at all, but would try to entice her and Connie with their jewelry and tobacco, their gemstones and golden lapel pins (seemingly golden in any case), and make a quick getaway before Abby had a chance to examine further, simply yelling at her where to go to find the real wares for sale.

But although those rapsallions with their gaudy jewels were certainly the memorable ones, the most frequent (and most sought after) were the ones bearing tasty treats. Abby and Connie found themselves spinning every which way, seeing child vendors moving about with iced creams, toffees, and apple ciders. Some were willing to hand over samples – Conrad remarked that it was Abby who usually received such offers, and she did get a lovely taste of cakes and cookies decorated with lovely colored sugars. One brave boy even transported (though she couldn't imagine how) warm coals in his basket, on which he sold fresh slices of warm roasted ham.

Desperately trying to hide her salivating, Abby recommended to the baron that they put on their skates. This was easier said than done, as it took nearly half an hour to find a log to sit on, remove their boots, and fumble with the laces and hooks around their new skates. Abby was embarrassed at her clumsiness, at least until she looked over and saw Connie as befuddled as herself. For Ellie's part, she had no skates, but she showed no shame in abandoning the two of them, sliding off to find some other entertainment rather than watch her two companions fumble with their laces.

It was all the same to Abby, as once they were done, she and Connie found themselves just as poorly skilled at skating as they were at putting the skates on. For the most part, they would have been able to move faster if they had simply chosen to walk. They fumbled all the way down the river, desperate to stay up on their feet. Whenever Abby felt herself about to slip, she was not ashamed to grab desperately for Connie, always next to her, always supporting her, always ever so warm. And for his part, Connie never seemed to lose his balance at the same time she did, politely waiting for his turn to nearly fall and break his own neck; and always preventing himself from doing so by grabbing onto Abby. Grabbing her in ways that, if he weren't about to fall, she noted he

would never dare to touch her. It was a pity they soon learned to skate better, she thought devilishly.

In time, they managed to track Ellie down upon the ice. Her boisterous laughter was rather hard to miss. Deep within a raucous crowd, Abby moved among the people to find her friend tossing a ball at nine pins arranged haphazardly upon the ice, losing rather happily to other jolly folks enjoying the game.

“Abby!” she called out when their eyes met. “Abby, come play nine-pins with me!”

More than eager to have fun, Abby fumbled her way to the lanes and threw the ball in the most embarrassingly poor manner possible. She rarely hit anything, and she tried her best to answer the taunts of other folks deriding her skills as a bowler. Thankfully, Conrad could easily dissuade the more deplorable folks for backing up their taunts, simply with a few words and a stern presence. But those who were willing to answer back to him were always left at a standstill whenever Ellie met their calls with backtalk that could make the coldest cheeks blush with hot embarrassment. Abby loved every word of it.

And she especially loved that her friend had called her “Abby.”

After hours and hours of toffees, roasted ham, and hot cider, after the nine-pin bowling and a few moments when Abby and Connie realized how fast they could spin in circles if they only held each other’s arms tightly, the skates came off and the walk to their hotel commenced.

The wind howled, blowing hard along every street and through every alley. Those wise enough, like Abby and Connie, tried to walk as close to the walls of the riverside buildings as possible, hoping their high walls would block out the winds. This didn’t always work, though Abby didn’t mind, since it gave her an excuse to hold the baron’s arm tighter. His grip always replied in kind.

For Ellie’s part, she spent every moment of the walk to the hotel skipping from streetlamp to streetlamp, happily holding their poles with one arm as she swung herself around, laughing and staring gleefully at the lights atop the entire time.

The baron hadn’t the slightest idea what Ellie was doing.

Abby never confessed to him that she did. She simply smiled.

“She is quite a rambunctious spirit,” said Connie. “I can see why you would wish to have her around. On the contrary, I suppose I can take solace that with Lewis, I will find peace and quiet tonight.”

“I’m sure I’ll find a way to rest. There is a lot to do tomorrow,” replied Abby.

“Yes, you have to go to the Horse Guards and ask about your friends.”

“Oh, Connie, don’t you wish we could go to all the great sites of London? I would love to see them with you!”

“Well, there’s lots of time.”

“And yet it feels like there’s never enough! Don’t you wish sometimes we could...”

“Could what?” asked the baron innocently.

Abby actually wasn’t sure what she was saying. Her impulse had been that they might throw it all away. Their homes, their wealth, their previous lives – just make a break for it and live life freely, like crystal snowflakes flying to and fro. But what a shocking thought! What would her father do? And, really, what would the two of them do? And whatever would Connie think if she said such a thing?

If such a place existed, Abby thought, if there was somewhere they could run to, was that what she wanted?

Flustered, she smiled at Connie. “Sorry, I’ve lost my thought on the wind,” she lied.



* * *

London, England
February 3, 1814

“Horse Guards” was a funny name for a building, Abby thought, but she had been assured that it held extensive tradition. As Conrad had explained it, it reflected the relationship that the military personnel who worked within had with England’s long history of the mighty cavalry. It was meant to symbolize that dignified and romantic connection with the strength of a horse. All the various military departments of England came through here, including all the administrative departments connected to England’s Secretary of

War. If there was anywhere in England where the affairs of the military state of the empire were known, it was among the conglomeration of commanders and battle plans housed within.

It was unfortunate there were no horses here, Abby thought wistfully as her carriage approached. She had learned only last year how to ride one, in Oakfield. And she had spent a rather magical summer's afternoon riding with the baron, back when he was still a mystery to her. Thus, she had indeed grown rather fond of horses. Their musky scents, their strength, the gentle bounce of riding. Maybe there would be a stable, officers on mounts clip-clopping about. Maybe some kind, tame horse would enjoy a pat on its nose.

She stepped out of her coach and frowned. There were no horses, except the two that pulled her carriage, which would be out of sight soon enough. There were only a few guards and military personnel walking here and there.

Shaking herself out of her state, she started off towards the building. No matter, she thought. This was business. She patted her carriage horse on her way past.

A guard stepped forward to greet her. "Miss, if you please, state your business."

Abby had been fully dressed since early morning, and yet at his query, she felt like she had slipped on a rather heavy costume.

"I am Countess Somerville of Oakfield in Shropshire, and I have a meeting arranged with the representative of the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies."

"Understood, miss. Please, if you would be so kind." He led her to the interior of the main building.

Abby looked around at the great majesty of the central block. Oakfield Manor had nothing on such a modern building, she thought to herself. The manor was an old stone castle, decorated with modern luxuries and, indeed, was something to behold in her small life at that time, when she had seen little beyond her own blacksmith's home, or the false riches and put-ons of the Pendletons. But the way she felt when she first saw that old manor, after her old life, was much like what she felt now, seeing this new world open before her.

The Horse Guards was built of the finest stonework, covered over in the most exquisite stucco, woodwork, and paintings depicting great battles and austere parades of ages past. Every corner of the building was a place of power and strength, so that

nobody who entered could ever doubt the strength of the British cavalry, or the British military at large. How funny, Abby thought, all these guards moved about as if they weren't awe-inspired at every turn by how much nobility was surrounding them. How long, Abby thought, must you surround yourself by such majesty that it becomes commonplace?

The guard who had led her inside was speaking quietly to a desk clerk. Finally, the guard turned back towards Abby. "I beg your pardon Miss, but who is engaged in this meeting?"

"The Countess Somerville of Oakfield in Shropshire. I'm to meet with the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. Or a representative."

He bowed a little before turning back to the desk clerk. They fiddled with papers and ledgers. They then put that ledger away and opened a different one. Abby stared at some rather large paintings.

"This way, miss," said her guard escort, finally.

Abby was led into a nearby room. It was the most beautifully decorated dining room she had ever seen, with an ornate oaken table and several cupboards of dark mahogany, holding what looked to Abby like the most exotic fine china. However, nobody else was there.

"Please wait here, miss," said the guard with a bow. "Somebody will see you shortly." He turned and left.

Hmm, Abby thought. They had brought her to a waiting room. At least it was a nice and comfortable one.

Half an hour later, Abby was still in the room. The fact that the dining chairs were gorgeously cushioned no longer made the waiting comfortable. She had run out of things to admire, and could only stare out the window towards the courtyard for so long.

Just as she nearly nodded off, a dignified though otherwise flustered gentleman in uniform entered the room. He would have charged straight at Abby in his hurry, if he had not caught himself and leaped back towards the room's threshold. Abby stood, trying not to look like she'd had enough of waiting.

"Countess Somerville," said the man, "I do beg your forgiveness for this late introduction! Please, allow me to introduce myself. I am Lieutenant Ulrich Westmeyer, official undersecretary to the Earl of Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant. I

apologize for interrupting your busy day.”

“Oh please, no! I insist I should apologize to you, my good Lady Shropshire! The delay in meeting with you was only because there was...a slightly more difficult matter to address. Perhaps we could continue in my office?”

The walk to Lieutenant Westmeyer’s office was a long one, making its way up several staircases and down long halls. Where the entrance was decorated with ornate imagery – no doubt to curry an awed first impression for visitors – the farther they went into the building, the more often their halls were decorated with what Abby felt mattered most to the officers who regularly walked them: constant portraiture of themselves, or rather, whoever was in charge at the moment. Each image was of some lord of this or that or the other, all in stances of dignified grandiosity, which, if Abby chose a single word to describe them, the word would be “repetitive.”

“And this is Viscount Castlereagh, the predecessor to our Lord’s predecessor,” said the lieutenant by what seemed like the hundredth portrait. “I would have shown you the wing of the naval commanders had we known of your arrival, but, as it were...”

Abby was perplexed by this admission. “I don’t understand,” she said. “I was told a boy was sent ahead yesterday to make an appointment.” Abby had been going to visit yesterday, but Connie recommended she not show up unannounced, which was why he’d sent Lewis instead. Had she misunderstood?

“Er...no, I – I don’t recall,” the officer stammered, before pointing out the next ebony bust of some old man in front of a drab wall. Indeed, the deeper they got into the office halls, the more she noticed they abandoned gorgeous stucco wall design in favor of basic paneling over eggshell white walls. How very practical.

The lieutenant finally led her into a room – happily, it was filled with mementos of personal past battles and mounds of paperwork, rich with personality – where the two of them could talk. He reached over to a prepared kettle of water and an infuser of black tea. “Would you care for a cup of tea? It’s actually a very fresh delivery, all the way from India.”

“Thank you” replied Abby, accepting a cup.

“I don’t suppose you’ve been to the Frost Fair? I only bring it up because there is another Indian marvel anticipated. I hear that to prove the thickness of the ice, they have brought over an actual

pachyderm, an Indian elephant, as it were, to London! It's supposed to be a surprise for the commoners, of course. And, if you have any interest in the foreign and exotic, I'm certain such a sight will keep you quite entertained. Sugar?"

"No, thank you," replied Abby. "And though an Indian elephant skating would be quite the phenomenon, I must admit that I've come to London for an entirely different foreign affair."

"Oh?" said the lieutenant, halting himself from sipping his tea. There was a slight raise of his eyebrow and a hint of a smirk, and it occurred to Abby she may not have phrased her intent quite the way she had intended.

"The war with Napoleon," she added.

"Oh." The lieutenant looked dispirited and went back to his tea.

"Yes," continued Abby, "I have some dear friends who have recently sent sons off to the continent as soldiers. I am curious if... well, now that I say it aloud to an officer, I hope you'll forgive me for the nature of the request, but I wonder if you could somehow determine the fate of these two soldiers."

Although he was polite, Westmeyer did nothing to hide his incredulity. "Really? Forgive me, my dear lady, but I hope you understand that there is only so much I am able to do during wartime, and it can be difficult to meet this kind of request. Locating two specific boys in the entire army of the British Empire – stationed all around the entire world – during wartime."

Abby thought that when he said it that way, it certainly sounded like a ridiculous request – and she had come all the way to London to make it. She would have to see if using her position would help.

"I do respect that it would not be a simple matter," Abigail replied. "Although, I also know that the Somervilles of Oakfield have always been very supportive of Britain's programs around the world. And certainly more than supportive financially, as my predecessor, Lady Charlotte Somerville, would have gladly attested, given how much she has paid in taxes. Not to mention, many of our young men and boys have volunteered quite readily to join in the battle against Napoleon, marching proudly on French fields, even laying down their lives for God and country. I hope I am not overreaching in assuming that the country would be grateful to its benefactors for giving so much already."

Aunt Charlotte would have been proud, Abby thought, but she barely suppressed a frown of distaste at the sound of her own

words.

“W-well,” stammered the lieutenant, “Yes, yes, I quite see your point. Forgive me, I do not wish to express any reticence on the army’s part. It’s simply a matter of practicality, tracking two officers, well, not even officers, merely enlisted men, out of the many thousands around the world. It could take some time, you see.”

“But surely, you can narrow the field. They were engaged in France. Are England’s records in such disarray?”

“Well, I should hope not! Do you have a frame of reference in which we could start our search?”

“Yes indeed. The boys’ names are Randal Tillery and Gavin Cork. I believe they were engaged in fighting towards the end of last year.”

“Fair enough, fair enough,” said the man, writing the information down. “I hope you understand that, until I know more, I am not at liberty to share many details. Are the boys are from your county?”

Abby halted. They weren’t. Not if she was a Somerville. “W-well...no, actually. They are...the sons of friends, from, a further district.”

“And where was this?”

“Er... Mersey, Chapel... south of Manchester.”

“Manchester? That’s a fair distance from Shropshire. Do you own land there? Do they? What business do they have with you?”

When he phrased it that way, Abby suddenly felt again the insecurity that had plagued her on the way here. Really, what business did she have going all the way to London and demanding information from the Office of War? She was nobody. She felt her face flush with embarrassment.

“Wait...Mersey Chapel? That’s Lord Pendleton’s land, isn’t it?”

Abby stared, at a complete loss for words. “Yes, Mr. George Pendleton.”

“Ah!” chuckled the lieutenant. “Well, that certainly explains quite a bit, then! After all, anybody could offer that old man a fee for his land, given his current situation, but it will be easier to ingratiate yourself into the community if you settle their poor minds about the fate of their local sons. A crafty plan, Countess!”

“Indeed,” replied Abby with all the confidence she could muster. The truth was, she had no idea what the officer was talking about,

but looking foolish after gaining his admiration certainly wasn't going to help. "Can you tell me, have there been any new developments in the Lord's situation?"

"Well, only in the sense that nobody wishes to buy from him. Forgive me, I shouldn't speak ill of nobility, of course, even fallen nobility such as he. But that wife of his wasted every shilling they had, leaving the man penniless and noble in name only, and he just sat back and let it happen! It's hard not to talk, I must confess. Of course, as you know, it left him begging to surrender his family's ancestral lands, simply to earn enough to get by. All I can tell you is that he's having a devil of a time finding a buyer! Nobody wants any association with an embarrassment of an old title, and they all generally fear that the county he wishes to sell is as woeful as he has become! Quite an affair, really. Still, I try to avoid idle gossip!"

"Yes, of course you do," said Abby, smirking. "Well, if there is nothing else, I believe I shall keep in contact with you about those soldiers. After all, I'll be here for a few days longer at least. I mustn't miss ice-skating elephants and county expansions, no matter how high the price."

"You could make a mutual purchase with Baron Wallen, if needs be, I'm sure."

It was like sinking into the coldest, darkest water. Everything had grown heavy. Lieutenant Westmeyer quickly noticed the silence and broke it by awkwardly ushering Abby out the room, stammering and avoiding eye contact all the way. A guard escorted her back out the way she came. All the beautiful artwork that mesmerized her on the way in barely registered at this point.

She had never mentioned Baron Wallen to the lieutenant – not even once. She was sure of it.

How did he know of their association?



* * *

Blackfriars Bridge, London, England
February 6th, 1814

In all her life, Abby had never seen an actual elephant. Pictures, certainly, but never a real one, until this moment. Standing side by side upon the ice, she and Connie stared as a crowd of onlookers gasped and clapped, and the large sheet was pulled away to reveal the majestic creature beneath. It was splendid; it was gorgeous; this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Abby's eyes drifted to all the happy London couples in front of her, laughing and patting their partners upon their shoulders. They would celebrate the marvel of this moment with wide eyes and laughter, this spectacle of a massive elephant walking across the frozen river, the thick ice keeping it from sinking. They held hands and stared longingly into each other's eyes. They were happy to be here, together.

Abby envied them. She was here with Conrad, but she was feeling unsettled. She had been for a few days now.

She'd had such a blissful few months. Playing in the snow, dancing in the lanes of Mersey Chapel. Reading letters, waving to friends. Strolling with her love under the leaves of the trees, staring deeply in each other's eyes. She had leaped at the chance to enjoy a festive trip with Connie, a man who was handsome, yes, but also an honest and trustworthy companion. He cared about others and was eager to make lives better.

Life. It was a precious thing, as the Tillerys knew far too well.

Abby couldn't even begin to know what it felt like to lose a son. To lose anybody to death, really. She had been blessed with a kind life, in general. Certainly, there had been struggles –the previous three years had been proof enough of that – but now she could only see where that life had gotten her. Wealth, ease – and the ability to live a simple life despite it.

She didn't belong. She was a fraud, an imposter.

What she wouldn't give – she would throw it all away to ease Mrs. Tillery's struggles. To help her ailing father. To help anybody who deserved it! And with all these blessings, what did she do?

"Ice skates," she murmured.

Connie turned his gaze towards the young lady. "I'm sorry, darling, do you wish to go skating after this?"

"I never wish to go skating again."

Only now did the baron notice the redness in her eyes, the heaviness in her cheeks. "Darling... Abby, whatever is the matter? Please tell me."

“Connie, I am ashamed of myself.”

“What? Whatever got that idea in your head? What do you mean?”

“Perhaps you should be ashamed, too; look at us. How many people do we know who could make this trip to London so easily? How many people around here are from far away? This is such a luxuriant excursion, Connie, so magnificent! I’m feasting on apple cider while a poor dear friend of mine is suffering back at home, due to the loss of her son.”

“But you’re handling that, aren’t you? At the Horse Guards?”

“Yes, but Connie, don’t you see? Is this my life now? To throw money at problems until they magically go away? I never wished to be like the Pendletons, I never wished to be like my aunt! And now look at me. I’ll never have to struggle for anything. Death comes, people like Ellie and my father labor, Napoleon burns Europe, and I’m...staring at some clomping animal for a laugh!

“I felt so helpless when Mrs. Tillery’s son died. Baking bread and kidney pies? For heaven’s sake, her son was dead and I felt so small, so helpless. Then you came in and... and...oh Connie, I needed to get away. I didn’t come here to help her – I came here to help myself! Is this my life now, Connie? To fritter away the hours, indulging myself on ice skates to help me forget about real life? Connie, what do you even see in me?”

She stood silently upon the ice, watching Connie’s face as he watched hers. In his eyes, she could see a struggle happening, and she waited to see what he would say to her.

“Abby,” he finally answered. “Let me tell you something I should have told you a long time ago about my wealth. About the people who live in my hamlet—”

The whole world erupted with screaming. There were cries of anguish, and the ice slanted. Abby sank into the coldest, darkest waters. Everything grew heavy. She struggled against it, but it was no use. The world could take her away, for all she cared.



Abby awoke with a compress across her brow, absorbing the sweat of fever. She was clothed in a hospital gown and tucked under clean sheets. The bare and drab room was only mildly brightened by an arrangement of beautiful dried flowers on a small table next to her. Light entered from a small window, vaguely dark from a smoky sky.

Conrad, red-eyed and requiring a shave, held her hand.

“Connie.” She could barely get the word out; her throat was very dry.

“Abby!” he exclaimed. “Abby! I am so glad you are awake. Are you comfortable? What can I do? I was so afraid your last words would be ones of sorrow. Here.” He held a cup of water to her mouth.

Abby shifted weakly and sipped the water. It was warm, but it felt good on her throat.

“That foolish stunt with the elephant,” Connie continued, “it’s no wonder the ice broke. But none of that matters now, none of that matters. What counts is, when I thought I’d lost you, all I wished for was more time with you. I could not bear the thought of losing you!

“Please do not dream that your life is worthless, or that you don’t count for anything; a heart as generous and warm as yours is what I would fear the most to lose. I cannot risk losing you. Abigail, please...will you marry me?”

Abby was speechless, and could not tell if her racing heart was from her illness or Connie’s words. But before she could answer, that perfect moment was shattered as lieutenant Westmeyer and several other officers entered the room. And although she was still weak, she would swear on her life that, behind them in the hall, she caught a glimpse of Lewis in their company.

“Forgive my intrusion, Countess,” Lieutenant Westmeyer said before turning to the baron, who rose powerfully to his feet.

“Baron Conrad Wallen, I regret to inform you that you are to be placed under arrest.”

“On what charge?” the baron demanded.

“Treason.”

Chapter Eight

*Kensington Hospital, London, England
Early March 1814*

Breakfast was the same barley milk Abby had been served for several days. It was hard to complain, at first, simply because it was a change of pace from the vegetable soup they used to provide. That was really just vegetables, barely cleaned, stewed in water, and served lukewarm as a sorry disappointment of soup. So when Abby received a respite, any respite, she welcomed it. It was just like the day her menu changed and they began to offer oatmeal, heartily thick and creamy. It was bliss.

A week later, after her tenth bowl, she wished for vegetable soup.

Whatever they served her, Abby tried to see it as simply the food she needed to grow stronger. She was indeed improving, but she knew, as did the doctors, that her condition would improve only with bed rest. Excess exertion would inflame her condition and keep her here longer. So she lay patiently, but her heart pained.

There was a time, not too long earlier – two or three weeks ago, Abby believed – when she had a very different attitude. Then, she had been relentless in her desire to escape from her hospital bed. As soon as she had regained a modicum of her strength, she began to argue with her nurses, insistently rise from her bed, and leave her private chambers. She was still rather weak, and easily returned to her bed by the nurses. But as soon as they looked away, she would rise again. The situation escalated when a doctor forced her to swallow a dose of laudanum.

When she opened her eyes after being drugged, when the hazy, spinning world came back into view, Ellie was there.

Abby didn't say hello (or maybe she did, the world was still so hazy) nor did she offer an explanation.

"Ellie, thank heavens you're here. I must leave immediately!" she had said, and tried to get up.

Ellie grabbed her firmly and pleaded for Abby to remain calm, but Abby was having none of it, and slapped the girl away as she struggled to rise. But just as her world was steadying itself, she felt herself thrown back onto the mattress with such force she could have sworn an act of nature, like a tremor or a hurricane, had shoved her down. Abby realized to her shock that it was Ellie who had pressed her into the bed, as she looked up into the girl's wide eyes.

"Now, M'Lady," said Ellie, a slight shake in her voice, "I don't wanna hurt you. I really don't! But I will say I'm to keep you in this bed by whatever means I can."

The scene froze for a moment, Abby not knowing what to do or how to move, staring wide-eyed in fright at her dearest friend in the world, Ellie, pressing her down and threatening her. Finally, she couldn't help but laugh at the hilarity of it all. It was the first good laugh – followed by the first good cry – she'd had in quite some time. She soon resigned herself to stay put.

And so, she was left to rest in bed, in a weakened state with a thriving fever. For another fortnight the doctors labored to heal her. With soup. And milky barley.

But even though Abby became patient in her recuperation, her determination to leave never faltered. She simply chose the wiser path of taking better care of herself until she could be discharged with a clean bill of health. She had to leave, the sooner, the healthier, the better!

This was because of how this all started. Because of what happened, the first day she opened her eyes.

"Treason."

The word rang in her memory. It was the word used by Lieutenant Westmeyer against her beloved. The word that took him away.

"Treason."

Ellie was her best friend, and her presence was, indeed, welcome. But Abby longed for the feeling that filled her chest with a warming glow when, on that first day, she'd opened her eyes, and her world was filled with Connie looking back at her. She wanted him hugging her every morning, she wanted to wipe away his tears.

She wanted to answer his proposal.

"Treason."

Conrad had demanded to know why so many officers of the law

stormed his beloved's private quarters, ruining this beautiful moment. She could remember the shame coming across his face when he realized they were here for him. They had accused him with one word she couldn't stop from ringing in her ears, especially in her dark, fevered moments.

Treason. Baron Conrad Wallen. Her Connie, accused of treason! And how so, exactly? What had the baron done that was treasonous? And to whom? England? The war?

And then there was Lewis, hiding poorly and rather shamefully in the hall just outside her room. Why had he been there? What was his involvement in all of this?

"Ah," Connie had said, his eyes coming to rest upon Lewis in the hall, his shame melting away into a sort of...what would Abby call that look? Despondence? Acceptance? Maybe self-pity. "I see. Well, let's get this settled. No one can ever say that I am not willing to help." He had then left in the company of the officers, who closed her door behind them. Abby's last sight was of her own outstretched hand, weakened from having nearly been frozen in the River Thames, reaching out desperately for Connie, to pull him closer. To hold him to her heart.

The door closed, her hand dropped, and with that, everything went dark.



* * *

Her plummet into the Thames led to treatment for hypothermia and waterborne infection, and it took time to get better. It was now early March, and the blistering cold of the winter had warmed slightly in all places except Abby's gloomy hospital room. The flowers that Connie had brought deteriorated into waste and were removed by the nurses, leaving no decoration in an otherwise bland hospital room. Here, Abby spent her days lying in bed with thin sunlight coming through to illuminate a quiet and lonely space. No matter how bright the day, or how bright Ellie's cheerful disposition, Abby was acutely miserable. Occasionally, she left her

bed to start walking again, to exercise her weakened legs. Any hope of getting any pleasure from her excursions into the building would be met with disappointment. The corridors of this hospital were as bare as her room, though these at least found a mixture of white and an ashy gray with which to decorate their walls.

Her floor had private rooms, most much like the one in which she rested. Whether her room arrangements were made by Connie or prepared automatically because she was the Countess of Shropshire, she didn't know, but she did come to understand that it was a luxury to have a private room here. Most people brought into the hospital were taken to recuperate in a large hall capable of holding many persons recovering together.

Once the hospital staff came to understand that Abby would make no further attempts to leave the hospital before her full recovery, they permitted her to wander, if she felt the walk and air would do her some good. She saw the wards firsthand, lined along the sides with narrow beds, many lines and pulleys hanging over them to help hold any injured limbs as needed. Abby couldn't decide which seemed more ghoulish: the hanging, swinging, empty monstrosities of metal wires hanging over the patients, teasing them with their potential use... or the ones that were in use, because they were currently holding the severed and damaged limbs of some poor soul in pain.

Back in her own room, Ellie waited faithfully. Abby had noticed that Ellie had taken the time to practice a lovely new hobby, that of sketching. The lone bedside table had a drawer containing a bible and some loose sheets of paper, and the hospital staff were good enough to provide her with bits of charcoal from the various building fireplaces. In her time at Abby's bedside she had increasingly improved, going from childlike blundering shapes to realistic proportions, to shading and works of rather exquisite imagination. Many of her images, mostly the early ones, captured what London looked like outside their lonely window. Some appeared to be memories of her home, and, in a few instances, Abby's old room in Oakfield Manor. A few were rather romantic images of elephants and lampposts glowing brilliantly.

There was one, Abby saw as she came into her room, of a boy, almost a man, who appeared to be Lewis. It was dark and brooding and hard to discern because Ellie had taken to streaking her charcoal strokes, as if he were drawn in torrential rain. "That's

Lewis, isn't it?" asked Abby.

Ellie looked up, unaware of her patient's entrance until she spoke. "Yes, though I don't know how to capture him, so to speak." She met Abby's eye with a wry smile.

Abby knew what she was thinking. Neither of them had seen Lewis since the day Connie was taken away.

"Ellie," Abby started slowly, lowering herself gingerly to her bed. "I feel I must apologize to you."

"Goodness, whatever for?" Ellie answered, stopping her drawing.

"Well...you were meant to accompany me to London for a quick investigation and, let's be frank, a fun little trip to the Frost Fair. But I know you weren't counting on me falling ill and being trapped in London. It's not fair to you, having to stay here by my bedside, while your family must worry. The nurses here would be comfortable keeping me company, and I could discharge you from my service and pay for a coach..."

"Oy oy oy, none of that, none of that! I've written to my brother Zeke, the only one who can read and write worth a toss, that I'd be away longer than expected. And that since I was being paid to be your escort, I was certainly earning a decent wage, so they won't complain. And frankly, M'Lady, even if they couldn't live without me, never mind their protesting, the fact of the matter is that they wouldn't respect me if I left my hurt and dyin' friend scared and alone in a cold and sad hospital room, an' I wouldn't expect them to! They can cook and clean after themselves for a time, until you become your beautiful self again."

"But don't they miss you?"

"Oh, they must," Ellie said, looking up, lost in thought. "But no more than your da misses you."

Indeed, Abby thought. She had dwelt upon what effect her illness would have on her father's constitution. She wrote to him often enough, assuring him of her improving state and her thoughts and dreams. She told herself that, surely, he would be fine until she returned. But he had been ailing when she saw him last, so she worried.

Partly to that end, and partly because she couldn't bring herself to face the reality of her situation, she did not reveal every detail of her misadventures. Though, she thought, it was a perplexing matter that she felt comfortable sharing with her father how she survived a

plummet into a river and a strong fever, while not having the nerves to tell him that Baron Wallen had been arrested. Her father adored Connie, she knew, but she also remembered how her previous love, the treacherous Eugene, had broken her heart. She worried that news of the baron's incarceration would upset her father. Truth be told, Abby knew, she herself was still perplexed by it.

"Well, then," Abby responded, "I'm incredibly grateful you're here. Thank you so much, my dearest. I must ask, is there any news concerning Baron Wallen?"

At this, Ellie looked dispirited. "Alas, M'Lady, I must confess, I've gotten nowhere with this investigation, if you can call it that. I went down there with all your written requests for information, I even went down there all on my own on an occasion or two. And every single time, this Lieutenant Westmeyer was said not to be present, and I was told I should try again later, or even leave him my address so that he could forward me any information. A fat bag of rubbish, if you ask me, since – I mean, think about it. He must know that the reason I'm there and you're not is because you're bedridden, in the very place he saw you last, so if he wanted to contact you, he would know how! Plus, you must wonder how busy the Earl of Bathhurst must be if his undersecretary himself is never around! Why, even the busiest farmer in the heart of harvest can stop for a chat!"

"Yes," Abby replied quietly. "I daresay the undersecretary wishes to pretend I was never here. I've served my purpose in making the baron accessible to him, and now I am to be swept under the rug."

"Well, don't go blaming yourself, M'Lady," replied Ellie, ready to get back to her charcoal. "It seems obvious that Lewis was involved as well, though I cannot fathom how. And, if I may be forgiven for overreaching, well..."

"What is it, Ellie?"

"Well, I thought about that some, and decided I'd investigate. An' I came to something, though I don't know if it'll be of any use, like."

"At this point, anything could help! What did you learn from the authorities about Lewis?"

"Well, see, that's the thing. I'd just given up thinking I'd get anything out of the Horse Guards after that whole problem finding

Baron Wallen. So then I thought to myself, how did Lewis get mixed up in this at all, right? Because that's the thing, Baron Wallen brought him to London, not the horsey people! He was his escort, right? So, last I wrote to Zeke to tell him how rich I'm gettin' off your pay, I also asked him to go the next town over, to the baron's lands, and ask about Lewis."

Abby's jaw dropped. Why hadn't she thought about inquiring about him this way, she thought, feeling like a fool.

"Well," Ellie continued, "as it so happens, Ezekiel learned a tad. Firstly, Lewis's family – oh, they're called the Planters, by the way – they say he's not back yet, either! Yeah! All this month, he hasn't returned home. Well then, good ol' Zeke always was a clever sort, always knew how to fib to get his way, says he told the Planters he couldn't get in contact with me and was worried about me bein' in London, and if, perhaps, their own son could look in on me, would they be willin' to let him get in touch with Lewis?"

"Oh Ellie, I could kiss you! How brilliant! Did they say how to reach him?"

"Well I'm not sure kissing is a good idea, M'Lady, but yes, they gave Zeke an address."

"Address? He has a residence here? Or perhaps a room at an inn?"

"Well now, see, there's the rub, M'Lady," Ellie said, lowering her voice and leaning close. "The address they gave me is for an office at the Horse Guards."

"Lewis is being held by the authorities *inside the Horse Guards*?"

"Indeed."

"He's still in their custody? But why?"

The silence lingered, giving Abby time to settle on a most interesting theory: Connie could currently be in custody anywhere. But if they wanted to keep Lewis close, it would seem that they would wish to keep the baron just as close, if not closer. Could he also be at the Horse Guards? It was a good thought, mused Abby. If she could find him, could she arrange to have him released? If she could only hold him close once more, wrap her arms around him and bring her lips to his...

"Well," answered Ellie, "I reckon Lewis is the witness they have against Baron Wallen, the one who got him arrested. His testimony would be needed to uphold an accusation of treason, like."

Abby loved Ellie with all her heart, but even so, she couldn't

restrain herself from turning a cold stare on Ellie for the suggestion. Abby knew she was merely worried, she knew she didn't mean it, but Ellie, nevertheless, saw the glance.

"Oh, please forgive me, M'Lady! I don't mean to say your Baron did anything wrong; I'm certain he's innocent, like. But the thing is...treason is very serious, and the undersecretary to the man in charge of England's wars don't go makin' that kind of accusation lightly. So what worries me is that, even if he's innocent – which I'm sure he is – if they're holdin' on to his accuser, then they mean to use him for all he's worth. They're serious. Determined, like."

Abby loved Ellie for many reasons: because she was sweet; because despite her age and upbringing, she was rather wise. And also because she was so blissfully, simply honest.

"Yes," Abby breathed, sinking into her bed. "Yes, I daresay they are."



* * *

Kensington Hospital, London, England
March 1814

It was Abby's last day in the hospital. She'd been cleared by a doctor this morning and told she could vacate her room at her leisure. Abby was quite happy to be leaving.

"Well," Ellie said, a thick stack of papers in her hands, "I can't disagree with you about wishing to leave. But for what it's worth, I found the time to learn to draw in a way I likely would never have found, otherwise. Small comfort, I know, but sometimes small is the only comfort we get."

That was true, Abby thought, and a kind opinion. And after all this was over, perhaps Abby would take some time to reflect on what needed to be done in her life. In a serious way, not in the vague manner she had done when she was lost in love and daydreaming of sunny skies, but rather, real consideration of what mattered. What would be her role as a countess? Should she reject

that role outright? And where would Connie fit into her life?

No matter what, she knew, he would be very central. They had gone through too much, and he had held her too strongly, helped her so determinedly, it would be torturous not to have him. Abby had accomplished so much in her own life thanks to the confidence he had given her. Now, she wished to do something to help him when he needed help the most. Stepping out into the hall, Abby moved out of the way of a swiftly moving nurse and turned to wait for Ellie.

"I still have a few affairs to handle here," Ellie said. "Please come back for me. Perhaps there is some mail for you at the front desk?"

Abby thought that was odd. What "affairs" could Ellie possibly have in the empty hospital room? And it wasn't like her to send Abby to fetch her mail, rather than get it herself. It seemed as though this mousy little girl had some embarrassing personal issue to deal with and wished for a bit of privacy. And it was true that this was the last time Abby could check for any important mail. Maybe she would finally hear from the lieutenant. Maybe even, by some miracle, Connie! And if so, she could delay no longer.

Another nurse raced past as Abby slowly moved down the corridor, wondering about her next move. It was quite possible that Lewis Planter was somewhere on the grounds of the Horse Guards, but if the lieutenant was indeed attempting to distance himself from Abby, then he certainly would not reveal the young man's whereabouts or anything else about his purpose. It was probable that he would avoid her altogether.

She considered throwing her weight around some more, using her authority to manipulate this situation. Except, again, Westmeyer could simply hide from her. And if not him, who could she turn to? What other avenue did she have? Should she write to Lewis? She had no way of knowing if he would respond, or whether he might be whisked away when news reached the lieutenant that he had been located. So many options, Abby thought, and yet so few. There had to be another avenue in London, there just had to!

Another nurse raced past, and then another. Abby had not seen this much activity in the hospital halls her entire stay. Something must be going on. Abby hoped it wasn't too serious.

On her way to fetch her mail, she decided to take a quiet walk through the communal patients' hall. She opened the door, entered

the hall...and found it overrun with injured men. The hall was usually quite empty, but it was now a tumult of groans that drowned out any comforting words, as every bed was occupied by a bandaged man bearing the stains of blood and disease upon their clothes. Nurses walked among the bodies, administering various medicines and balms, checking wounds, or helping to hold someone still.

Abby crossed the room slowly, taking in all these poor men, avoiding getting in any of the nurses' way, before her eyes fell upon a young man who was comparatively better off than some of his neighbors. His limbs were not in casts; his body was not bandaged or bleeding, save for some thick wrapping around his head and right eye. He looked at her and smiled.

"Well, as far as the nurses go in this place, I can't say I have any complaints about their hiring policies," said the young man.

"Kind words," said Abby, grinning, "though misplaced. I don't work here; I'm a patient. Or rather, I was. I'm being released today."

"A fine pity. Well, for us, and not for yourself."

"What happened here? Was there some sort of accident in the city?"

The young man shook his head as much as he dared. "If there was, the timing couldn't have been worse, for our ship just came into port and released us lads into London's care. No, good lady, I reckon the city is just fine and carrying on without complaint. We, on the other hand, only just arrived from the continent. We were part of Wellesley's armed forces fighting Napoleon across Europe. I'm Private Tom Torinson. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

"Pleased to meet you, Private. I am," and she hesitated. She had been about to say she was the Countess of Shropshire, but she quickly realized how much she enjoyed simply talking to another young man so casually. "Abby Greene," she finally answered.

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you, Miss Greene, though I do wish the circumstances were more favorable. If seeing you with one eye is quite so pleasing, I regret having the other injured."

Abby scoffed, but also chuckled. "So brazen!" she responded. "They don't teach you manners in Wellesley's army?"

"They do indeed, Miss Greene. Though," he motioned to his bandaged eye, "one could argue that war teaches you not to let a

petty thing like decorum prevent you from valuing every moment as if it were your last. And war, if I may say so, is a stern tutor.”

“Fair enough. All these men were with you?”

“By and large, yes. And though your empathy is certainly appreciated, I ask you to save your tears for those who died on the continent. What you see here are the ones well enough to survive the trip across the channel. There were men still alive when I left who weren’t sent across because we all knew they wouldn’t be alive when we got here.”

Abby thought of dear Mrs. Tillery, and all her memories of the original reason why she came to London came rushing back.

“An honorable fate for fellows so brave and so strong,” added Abby, only to see Tom’s frame suddenly sink deeper into his mattress, his gaze turning away. She continued, “That is actually the reason I came to London in the first place. I’m not from here, you see. I hail from a small village far north of here, Mersey Chapel. There are two lads from there who went to fight Napoleon as you did, and I was hoping to learn...well, what became of them, I suppose.” Abby told herself there was no need to explain that she knew one was already dead, and the other in self-imposed prison. “I came to speak to any official who may have any news, but...”

Tom understood. “But you were sent off. It’s a harsh reality. It’s a big war, with so many souls running around, working together to defeat a terrible threat. I’m fairly certain the generals and commanders don’t wonder about us all that much, except when we win. To each our lot in life.”

“How callous! I’m certain England is very grateful for what you’ve done for the country.”

“And if that were true, Miss Greene, couldn’t the country help you find your missing boys, since they’re so bloody grateful for each one of us?” Tom’s voice rose. He was starting to become rather agitated, and Abby wondered if it would be better if she simply carried on before making more trouble. However, Tom exhaled a great sigh before continuing calmly, “I’m terribly sorry for my rudeness, Miss Greene. I meant no disrespect. It’s just...hearing you speak about England, King, and Country – I wish I could think back to when I hoped to be taken up by the army to glory and adventure. Before seeing my friends shot and killed. Before a cannon explosion sent me hurtling towards a stone wall and concussed me – and maybe even burst my eye. Before I found myself jealous of the

dead, for at least they can rest, at last.”

Abby listened to this young private, who did not sound as bold and brave as she thought an army boy would. Rather, he sounded anguished, as if crying for help deep inside. She wondered, was Randal Tillery crying out for his mother when he died? Was Gavin Cork lying in a dark corner at this very moment, still crying right now? Is this the secret of what happened to these boys? Is this what was hidden from her view? This...reality.

“Please forgive me, Miss Greene. I suppose I need to rest,” said the young man.

“Perhaps you do,” Abby replied. “Perhaps you all do. If this is your fate, I can only pray that, for you and your friends, you now have a chance to rest.”

“Perhaps sooner than you think,” answered Tom. “I shipped out of Bordeaux, in France, pretty close to the capital. I daresay that soon, Napoleon will be beaten back for good. I sure hope it was all worth it – especially for those who came before.” He seemed lost in thought for a moment, before adding, “You say you’re from Mersey Chapel?”

“Well, yes.”

“And these boys’ names? They were...”

“Er, Randal Tillery and Gavin Cork.”

“Well, I don’t know them. But maybe...”

Abby watched as the man seemed to stare into infinity before noticing her gaze and answering finally, “Forgive me, madam, I do believe I need my rest. Been through a lot, and feel rather exhausted.”

Abby got up and had begun to move away before the young man stopped her one more time.

“And if I may add, Miss Greene...I appreciate what you said, calling our boys brave and strong. But forgive me for being so blunt, there is nothing brave or strong about dying. And that’s a fate the dead would gladly trade, I’m sure, if it meant they could open their eyes again, so to speak.”

Abby listened, nodded, and went on her way as the private leaned his head back and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep.

As she gathered her final letters at the front desk of the hospital, she thought back to dear Mrs. Tillery, and the anguish of her cry when learning of her son’s death. It made sense, her reaction, thought Abby. After all, she was an older mother, and her child was

wrenched away so violently. And yet, she had told herself that a strapping lad like Randal would be made of stronger stuff, if for no other reason than simply because he was a soldier, and brave enough to stare death in the face. But then, if that was true of a soldier, then what really did happen to Gavin? Had he been demoralized, like Private Tom Torinson? Was he in mourning like Mrs. Tillery? Or was he afraid? And afraid of what?

Death?

Life?

Abby returned to her former room to collect Ellie, only to find the room dramatically changed: every wall had been plastered with every last one of Ellie's charcoal drawings. Turning every which way, she beheld scenes of wintry London, sunny London, wild animals, hands, tables, still life. And, Abby saw with some egotistical glee, a few images of herself sleeping.

"I thought you'd like it," Ellie said to a silent and mesmerized Abby. "It was a bit of a planned surprise; I hoped you'd come back and see what I'd done. Everything here is so bare, I wanted your last memory of this place to be filled with some pleasure. I wanted your last memory of this place to be a happy one, so you wouldn't have any regrets. Granted, now I think on it, it probably would've made more sense to keep decoratin' all the while you were here, but I only just thought of it yesterday."

Abby, tears jerking from her eyes, grabbed Ellie in the tightest hug possible. Sweet, innocent Ellie, so full of life and wonder.



* * *

There was a park bench not far from the hospital. Abby and Ellie sat there together to eat.

There was still snow throughout London, but it was a mild day. Perhaps it would have been better to look through her letters inside the hospital, except that the nurses were eager to see the ladies out – more patients were coming. Abby urgently needed to see whether any of these were addressed in Connie's handwriting.

Abby looked through her letters. There was correspondence from the Oakville alderman, which was no surprise. There was a very kind letter from her father; she perused it for any bad news and then put it away. She loved reading her father's letters, but there was always time later.

No, nothing from Connie. Nothing yet.

However, one letter was a mystery. There was no sender name, simply a return address at the Bath Hotel in Picadilly. For the life of her, Abby couldn't begin to imagine what that was about.

She opened it last, and began to read.

Her eyes darted to the end, and every warmth London had to offer grew bitter cold.

"No," Abby whispered. "No!"

Dear Abigail Greene,

Or perhaps I should offer my congratulations, as I have recently learned of your good fortune in becoming the heiress to the Countess Charlotte Somerville of Oakfield Manor, a most prestigious family legacy. And, more so, that in the last few months, with the Lady Charlotte's untimely passing, that you have inherited that prestigious position. My commendations to you and best wishes for your future endeavors, Countess Abigail Somerville of Oakfield Manor.

I have recently learned of some misfortune that has fallen upon an acquaintance of yours, the Baron Conrad Wallen of Shropshire. I have information that may be of interest to you in this matter.

For this reason, as well as past matters between you and my family, I wish to invite you to speak with me at the Bath Hotel in Picadilly. Please notify the front desk of your arrival at any reasonable hour; I assure you that I will await your appearance with great pleasure.

*Sincerely,
George Pendleton,
Baron of Mersey Chapel*

"Pendleton?!" Ellie exclaimed, reading over Abby's shoulder, indifferent to her lady's frozen stare. "But aren't they...didn't you say they...oh my..." There was a long silence, which was soon broken by Ellie once more. "I have to admit, I'm at a loss!"



* * *

Bath Hotel, London, England
March 1814

Abby knew she should go meet with the man immediately, that to postpone this meeting would be devastating on many counts. Certainly, to put off any news concerning Connie's situation was potentially putting his ultimate fate into question, as he may be in need of assistance as soon as possible. But Abby also knew, simply for her own peace of mind, she needed to get this matter over with. She needed to put an end to her involvement with the Pendletons.

Still, it was with reluctance that she approached the hotel. The Pendletons were the festering infection from the thorn in her side; they were the reason she felt cold whenever a shrill voice or hurtful accusation ever came her way. The Pendletons, though gone from her life, were nevertheless embedded in her memory as the curators of the worst years of her life.

As the unmarried daughter of the local blacksmith, going into service for the local gentry was a sensible decision. She could work hard and set aside her wages – paltry as they were – for the future.

But the Pendletons had a poor reputation among the villagers for good reasons. For one, they were very stingy, and the accommodations they provided were in very poor condition. Abby's attic room had holes in the ceiling through which birds came. Any expression of dissatisfaction was met with a furious tongue-lashing from Mrs. Pendleton (a toad in ladies' clothing), complete with threats that lazy servants would live in poverty from then on, because they would be dismissed with no reference. The abuse was constant, and it came from all members of the family – except Mr. Pendleton.

She hardly knew George Pendleton, since he rarely spoke and spent all his time staring wordlessly out the window or working on papers at his desk. He was vaguely affable, but he never raised an objection to his wife's rages or abuse. He took comfort in his scotch.

It was like his body was present, but his spirit was never there.

And now Abby found herself at the main desk of the Bath Hotel on Picadilly, in London's most affluent downtown core, requesting that the desk clerk send a footman to request an audience with Baron Pendleton, who, she added, was expecting her.

"Certainly," said the slightly framed clerk, while scanning the area around her. "Er, and is anybody else with you?"

"No," Abby responded with a polite but stern note in her voice. "Tell him Countess Somerville will not be kept waiting and will meet with him immediately."

"Ah...I see," stammered the little clerk.

Abby knew exactly what the man was implying. A lady, unaccompanied, was about to visit an older man, alone in his private hotel room. She needed to be stern; it was a quickly calculated solution to keep him from starting unsavory rumors, but perhaps it wasn't very effective in its hasty execution. But Abby used her title, so the risk to the little man's employment was very real, should she put in a complaint about his conduct. With her businesslike manner, she hoped to avoid having him arriving at... other conclusions.

It had been two days since she had read the letter on the park bench with Ellie, and in those two days, she had been seized by a tumult of memories that triggered a whirlwind of emotions. She dared not see him until she had herself well in order. She had needed some time to come to terms with the fact that, as much as she hated the idea of meeting with a Pendleton, she really didn't know this one. If he could help Connie, she couldn't afford to miss the opportunity.

The footman returned quickly and whispered to the clerk, who then turned to Abby. "I've been told Lord Pendleton is expecting you. If you would, please follow the footman to the suite."

Climbing the stairs, Abby regarded the lovely, ornate design of the Bath Hotel, with its many artisan stucco posts, large wall-mounted mirrors, regal carpeting, and massive chandeliers high above, housing individually lit candles, each with their own little glass saucers to keep the wax from dripping onto unwary tenants. Its beauty and elegance rivaled even that of the interior hall of the Horse Guards. As she climbed the stairs, holding her hand upon railings of polished brass, she wondered how many buildings in London were decorated in such marvelous fashion.

It really was a different world from the one she grew up in, where the most exquisite decorations were the grass and wildflowers, fluttering in a summer breeze. London truly was the cosmopolitan capital of the world, she thought to herself.

Passing yet another painting of an ancient Greek landscape, the porter finally brought Abby before a pair of finely carved doors with golden trim to match their shining handles. A loud tap with a lion-headed knocker was answered by a voice from within, saying “enter.” It was a voice from long ago, rarely heard. But memorable.

The doors swung open, Abby stepped within, and almost tripped over her own feet.

The room itself was massive, nearly twice as large as the waiting room at the Horse Guards, and contained within the character of every room one could expect from a dwelling: it was part dining room, part living room, part guest room – it even contained a bed along the wall at the far end.

A room this massive, and containing so many elements of a dwelling within its walls, was indeed designed to encapsulate all of life. There was not one surface of the suite that did not contain ample decoration of the finest quality, whether it be the paneling of fine wooden oak upon the lower walls, its paintings above that, the lengths of carpet of Arabic design, the skins and mounted heads of vicious animals hanging like prizes, the silks glittering and sparkling as they hung around otherwise dull corners, and globes and maps and books scattered about the room on tables.

And near a large window overlooking Picadilly stood the imposing figure of a man of class and character, the Lord Baron George Pendleton. He faced away from Abby towards the city below.

When the door behind Abby closed, when she could finally focus upon the man at the window, the baron finally turned to her.

“Abby Greene,” he said. “I do beg your forgiveness.”

Abby stood, stunned. The majesty of the room, the memory of this man. She had expected so much strength to emanate from his voice, maybe even a measure of command. She’d expected so many things, but not this.

“Wh...what?”

“I apologize,” explained Lord Pendleton, “for the treatment you experienced within my house during your time there. And while the apology is far too long in coming, I would be quite beside myself if

it were never to be spoken. Even though I know full well that the mere words can scarcely begin to express my regret.”

Abby’s head swam. This was just too much. “You called me Abby Greene.”

“Indeed, I did.”

“You...you know who I am.”

Lord Pendleton smiled, a courteous smile, as though she were a child. “Well, most certainly. For one, you are hard to forget, your very presence made an impact upon me when we first met those years ago. That, and...well of course I know your name. After all, the letter I sent was addressed to you.”

“Ah, yes,” Abby said, taking it all in. “The letter. You also offered me congratulations. You clearly learned of my...promotion, as it were.”

“Indeed.”

“And yet, you still address me as your former maid.”

Silence.

“Nostalgia, I suppose.” Abby’s retort was bitter.

Baron Pendleton ruffled his mustache a little at the accusation. “Forgive me, but you suppose incorrectly. For one, you were my former wife’s former maid. I did not require the aid of servants at that time in my life, nor would I wish such a fate upon you. And secondly, I would not presume that your name itself is some sort of...degradation. You are indeed a countess, I took it upon myself to presume which name you think in your mind when you refer to yourself. This is because I wished – and I promise you this – I wished simply for you to understand that my interest in you is genuine.”

Abby was at a loss for words. The light from the windows seemed to swallow her in brilliance.

“You seem to have put a great deal of thought into this.”

“Yes,” continued Lord Pendleton. “Please, if I may elaborate. Would you please join me in a drink?” He motioned for her to sit.

Abby crossed the room to an almost familiar sight: there was that armchair, the very same one from Pendleton Manor. And although the bookcases and fireplace weren’t there, many of the books, stacked upon new shelves, certainly seemed familiar. As did the side table. Even the scotch glass seemed the same.

Abby took her seat opposite this man. In the last minute, he had said ten times more to her than he’d said in the previous five years.

And all of it was almost overly courteous. Perhaps she gave away her thoughts with her stare, or perhaps the man truly knew her mind, for when he continued, he said, "I'm certain you must be bewildered by all this. I cannot blame you. Your experience with my family has likely given you a very negative perception of me, as well. And though you must understand that I would not be inclined to besmirch my own kin, at the same time...I cannot deny the effect they have had on others such as yourself.

"In recent times, as I'm sure you have heard, I've had some rather unfortunate developments in my private life. And while I have no interest in discussing them, I will say that they have given me a certain perspective on what I have accomplished in my lifetime."

"Your divorce." Abby immediately regretted blurting it out right after he made clear he did not wish to speak of it.

Thankfully, Pendleton simply nodded, seeming to take it in stride. "Indeed," he continued. "It was a long time coming, but I feel it was the right choice, given the destruction being wrought on my family name and fortune. It certainly wasn't an easy decision – but the right decisions rarely are. And they do grant one a perspective on mending that which was wrong before. Hence, my invitation to you.

"Which brings me back to why I wished to address you as I did, Abby Greene. Yes, I know full well that you have inherited a title, and from what little I have gathered, you seem to wear it with capability and grace. But I, too, know something of wearing an official title, and I think it reasonable to assume that you've likely heard what I've achieved with mine. A marriage of convenience to a wealthy family. An adulthood of being relegated to the position of a doddering old fool wandering his home in irrelevance. A life of watching everything I've hoped for waste away in greed and narcissism by a family that cared more for the image of success rather than the attainment of it. And ending with it all falling apart."

He took a deep sip of his scotch before continuing. "I think it safe to say that if my life has taught me anything, it's that a noble title is only as worthy as the person who bears it. I have watched you. And though you are a countess, I feel that such a position would be wasted if it had not been attached to the embodiment of strength and character that is Abby Greene. The reason I addressed

you as such is that I wished to pay respect to a woman who earned it.”

Abby couldn't help but blush. “You flatter me, good sir, and I do thank you. But I must not allow such flattery to be spoken without correcting it. After all, it's hard to believe you held me in such high esteem when you hardly even acknowledged me.”

“Fair enough, fair enough,” added the baron, nodding slightly. “I don't deny I ignored you. I was barely present, really. I hope you understand that when every waking moment is filled with ghastly shrieking and mindless drivel which you can do nothing about except accept it as fate, one might wish to dream themselves miles and miles away as often as they could.”

“I know something of that,” Abby replied as George Pendleton poured her a small whiskey.

“But,” he continued, “even as distanced as I was, I could still see the world around me. The prancing and singing coming from an attic with a supposedly sick servant within. An innocent girl too decent to ever rob a household, betrayed by another girl too proud to hide how she sneered and plotted. You stood up to every critical insult with nary a complaint. As my children wasted every shilling and ran off with whatever wealth I had to spare...well, it was hard not to compare you to them. I regret I did not have the strength then to defend you from my family. It is only now that I have had time to reflect on the error of my ways, that I can use what strength I've regained in my dignity to apologize.”

Abby stared at him and then smiled. There was so much damage in her past, she was sure it would never go away. But all the same, this was the first man she could remember who had tried to mend even a part of it.

“I do believe,” Pendleton continued, “that if things were different, I could have prevented the catastrophe that occurred. Alas, if wishes were horses...”

Perhaps, Abby thought, the scotch was getting to the man. She decided to interject before he embarrassed himself. “I recognize this décor.” She motioned to the books and the chairs. “You sat among it the first day we met. I'm surprised you still have it amongst everything else here.”

“Well, after my former wife was run out of Mersey Chapel and the children drained my accounts and ran off throughout the world, I was left with nothing but the manor, and I knew it was only a

matter of time before everybody realized I had so little left. I managed to sneak away only a sample of my personal effects before the rest was sold off by – forgive me for saying so – some of your neighbors to pay off my ex-wife’s debts, all while you were away in Shropshire, I reckon.”

“I’m sorry you had to endure that.”

“In reality, I earned it, doing nothing to reign in her selfishness because of my own weakness. And besides, as my confidence returned, I found that I needed it to endure what came after.”

“After?”

“Well, countess, a title has very little purpose in London without the coin to back it. That, plus the divorce, leaves me excluded from most all of society, except, perhaps, its gossip.”

Abby wished to comfort the poor man, though she had to admit that the first time she’d heard what happened to him was through Lieutenant Westmeyer’s gossip. Still, it was striking to her that she wished to comfort a Pendleton, of all people. She found herself respecting him, even caring for him, despite gossip from people like Westmeyer.

“Lord Pendleton,” Abby interrupted gently, “forgive me for interrupting. I do respect what you’ve done here today, and I accept your apology. Thank you, and rest assured, you are a man of quality, indeed. And, perhaps, if I may be so bold to surmise that that quality was what led you to send me your invitation in the first place, for as I recall, in your letter, you said you had news...”

“...about Baron Wallen!” Baron Pendleton interjected. He took another swig of scotch. “Yes, of course. I have heard through contacts in this fair city of your recent tragedies regarding your gentleman companion being arrested not too long ago. Now, after everything that befell you in my house, I would be remiss if I did not spend every available resource afforded me to aid you in this matter.”

“Yes, please, I beg you! What has happened? Why treason? Where is he?”

“If I may, if I may, Abigail. You are in a desperate state, that much I can tell. Though I insist that the only way to aid him now is to have a level head about these things. To your first question: What has happened is that your young man was accused by a certain Lewis Planter of treasonous actions against the empire. Now, you know, I’m sure, how many young men from Mersey

Chapel went off to fight against Napoleon?”

“Yes?”

“Well, all corners of England looked for able-bodied men to join the armed forces to go off and fight. However, through whatever machinations, it would seem that your young beau has always managed to avoid having recruiters enter his lands, and not one, not even one young lad has ever been enlisted from his county to fight against Napoleon.”

“But, is that it? He did not send his young men off to fight? That’s not a crime!”

“Perhaps not, but objectively, it does seem unpatriotic. And a dangerous act in wartime. In any case, by answering your first question, I daresay I also answered your second, why accuse him of treason. Although I know as well as surely you must, this flimsy pretext is not enough for so high an accusation. There must surely be more to this matter. Which, in a roundabout way, brings me to your third question: Baron Wallen is currently being held in a prison cell, albeit a decent and expensive cell, in the holds of the Old Bailey. Now, obviously, they wish to keep him in isolation until his trial, perhaps because they know their claims of treason have barely a leg to stand on, or perhaps they know something more. But whatever the case, you will have to learn from him directly. Now, I still have a few favors to pull in. And I believe, if we play it carefully, I may be able to get you a private audience with the baron this very night.”

Abby leaped from her chair and wrapped her arms around the dear man’s shoulders. Overwhelmed with gratitude, she couldn’t imagine such a day when everything would fall into place so perfectly – all through the generosity of this wonderful, caring man, George Pendleton. “Thank you,” she sobbed. “Thank you!” She held him so tightly and so gratefully, she barely noticed when the hug was returned.

On her way back out of the suite, she passed by the rugs and the decorations, the murals, and the books, and suddenly, came to realize that something was not quite adding together, though she was sure she couldn’t say what.

“Why are you doing this,” she finally asked Lord Pendleton. “Why are you risking everything for this? For me?”

George Pendleton lowered his head, before raising it again to answer. “I am responsible for what happened to your youth. I must

see it through, my redemption.”

“Redemption?”

“After you speak with Baron Wallen, whatever happens, come back here afterwards. I promise to help you further.”

Chapter Nine

*Old Bailey, London, England
March 1814*

It was late to be out in the streets of London; Abby was surprised to see anybody about. In her experience, even though the roads of Mersey Chapel and Oakfield were safe and free from brigands, in general, nobody stepped out late at night. It was just not what good people did, Abby thought.

Now, Abby rode in a luxuriant coach through the depths of the dark streets of London, and she knew she was right.

She had never before seen such a world, where on one street, a drunkard could be swaying with a bottle in his hand under the light of the streetlamp, and around the corner, another street was populated by a crowd of urchins, some barely older than six, huddling together for warmth. The coach took a quick turn and came upon a man and a woman pressed together. They separated quickly, surprised and embarrassed by the vehicle coming upon them, looking about innocently enough and straightening creases in the woman's skirts.

Every view in London seemed to reveal a new underbelly. It's not that Mersey Chapel had never had a shameful episode, any town likely had. But it was a shock to see it repeated, ceaselessly, around every corner and down every alley. Abby couldn't believe such a place existed in the world.

And yet, Abby had now become a part of it. Traveling down into the depths of London's streets, the nighttime was so dark that even the gas-lit streetlamps could do nothing to fight against it.

Knowing she would never be permitted inside the prison in daylight, Baron Pendleton had made arrangements with this coach driver to deliver Abby into the Old Bailey in the dead of night. London's esteemed center of legal proceedings, where the law was adjudicated masterfully, was where justice was doled out to all. Or so the belief goes, Abby thought. After all, the Bailey also held a

collection of holding cells for the accused who had not yet been sentenced, or perhaps were being held temporarily.

Neither of these was an accurate description of one man supposedly held within; he was neither a criminal nor a temporary tenant. He was Baron Conrad Wallen, Abby's beloved heart, who was, as far as she knew, kept in one such cell. He could be injured or starving, as Abby had imagined in her nightmares. There were no public records of him being held there, nor was he set to have a hearing anytime soon. And that, thought Abby, was a grave injustice! Abby felt like a thief in the night, coming here this way.

Around one more corner, Abby saw that the coach was approaching the Old Bailey itself, a majestic domed building of white, reflecting gaseous green in the dirty London air under a bright moon. The coach did not slow, but rather it made its way to a side gate, which swung open in anticipation of the visit. This was good, Abby thought. Nobody would get a chance to see her illicit visit this late in the evening or question her intent. Secondly, it proved that George Pendleton was reliable. His plan was running on schedule.

The gates shut behind them and the coach ran down an incline into a courtyard that was completely surrounded by the building itself. Deep within, there was only the pitch blackness, as all outside light was hidden and no torches within were lit. If Abby hadn't felt the sudden jolt of the wheels, she would never have known that the horses had come to a halt. There was nothing to see, nothing at all. And then, from a suddenly opening door, a lone figure emerged, illuminated slightly by a lantern he held. It bobbed to and fro as the man approached her coach.

Abby opened her door and carefully stepped down to the damp cobbles to meet her illuminated guide.

"You're the lady," said the man approaching Abby, with an odd inflection of the voice, as if this was partly a question posed to her, and partly a statement of fact.

"Yes," replied Abby. George had told her she would meet her guide underneath the Old Bailey. Nervous, she said no more.

The man looked her up and down, scowling. "I'm not certain why I was ordered to conduct myself here tonight, but my superiors gave me instructions to meet you long past evening hours, and—"

"I'm, sorry, who told you to be here?"

"Never mind that, madam, I simply mean to say I follow orders

to the letter. Follow me; we must be quick.”

Abby followed the bobbing lamp to the door. As her eyes adjusted to the light reflecting off the environ within, she found herself in a narrow, arched brick tunnel, the whitewash chipped and battered. There were many doors, each made of strong and bolted metal, their windows blocked with bars of iron, themselves unkempt and falling into rust.

In the dim shade of the guard's light, they rounded a corner and continued through several long passages, descending down spiral stairs, until finally arriving at a particular door of good quality, despite it being as locked as all the rest. It was here that the young guard hung his lamp before reaching into his pockets. He pulled out a ring of keys with one hand, and to Abby's great consternation, a caplock in the other.

“What is that for?” she asked, motioning towards the weapon.

“I'm here to let you in. When you're done, you're leaving. He isn't. This makes sure of that.” He held his weapon at the ready.

Abby watched as he turned his key in the lock and then stepped back and let her in.

Within, Abby was astounded. Granted, she had never seen the inside of a real prison before, though she had certainly imagined the grim walls and putrid conditions found within. Not so with this room, which was rather large, and contained within splendid niceties befitting a noble. A bed with a frame and satin sheets. Armchairs and oaken end tables. A dinner area complete with used plates and glasses among playing cards, arranged in an interrupted game of solitaire.

And there was also a lone figure, dressed only in relaxed weekend attire that hung looser than Abby recalled. Connie's face was pale and shocked at the sight of her, but he soon came alive with joy.

“Abby!” he cried.

“Connie!” They ran across the cell and embraced with all the passion racing in their chests. Abby did not realize how heavy her body had felt until the weight lifted from her at the sight of her beloved Connie. They embraced.

“Oh, Connie,” whispered Abby. “I missed you so! I had no idea where you had gone, where they had taken you! I thought such, such dreadful things.”

“Abby,” Connie answered with a tremor in his voice, “I am fine,

truly. But when I last saw you, you were barely conscious, and I've had no news of you since! I've been worried sick about you."

"Oh, sweetest Connie! I learned where you were only today; I searched everywhere, everywhere I could think of! And when nothing worked, I simply curled into myself and wished to have you hold me once more!"

"And many more times than that, I hope," whispered Connie. Abby laughed. It was the warmest laugh she'd had in some time.

"Connie," she looked at him clearly before continuing. "Connie, I heard that you were arrested for preventing military recruiting in your territories. It's an infraction at best – I can't understand why, or how, they could keep you here. It's certainly not treasonous."

"Well, now, that depends on who is doing it, Abby," he replied. "Do you remember our last day at the Frost Fair? I wished to tell you about my fortunes, my choices? Well, you see, my family is very old – ancient, in fact. At my home, we have many heirlooms that date back centuries, such as an old, old record of my family line. I am called 'Wallen' only because that is the name that resulted from generations of bastardization and change. Originally, my name was Valeur. French. It reveals how my family can trace its roots back to the French Normans who fought alongside William the Conqueror."

"Yes? And?" Abby didn't see where he was going with this.

Connie exhaled. "Well, darling, you see...there is an argument now that, because of ancient relations to a French heritage...that I may be motivated to prevent my citizens from joining England in the fight against Napoleon. Indeed, some think I was actively seeking to aid France." There was an extended silence between them as Connie sympathetically watched her eyes dart left and right, as if hoping to find someone who could explain this twisted joke.

"What?" she finally exclaimed. "But that's ridiculous! The Normans invaded eight hundred years ago! By now, they've intermarried throughout the realm. Everybody has some Norman blood in them, but we are all British."

"Likely true," said Connie, "but that is all speculative, whereas my heritage can be proven."

"It would still take a leap of the imagination to believe that an ancestor who'd barely learned to make fire could have any influence on you today!"

“Actually, darling, it would only take a witness to make that claim. You see, I often shared my family history with the children of my town, because they liked to hear it. They were so entertained, I couldn’t resist. But, in any case, a young Lewis Planter was in my audience. Yes, Lewis – who I sent to the Horse Guards on an errand, to inform them of your coming. But the reason they were surprised at your arrival, and the reason they knew I was in London, was because rather than doing his assigned task, he told them of my heritage and how it influenced me. According to his accusation, I prevented young Lewis from fighting against the French. He told them where to find me.”

Abby flared her nostrils with furious anguish. “Oh, that horrid little...! What a dreadful boy! You know, Ellie never liked him! She is such a wise girl. For him to blame you for forbidding recruiters to come near him!”

Connie suddenly looked confused. “Forbid what?”

“Forbid recruiting in your territories.”

Connie understood, but his gaze did not look any happier. “Oh dear,” he answered. “Oh Abby, you misunderstand. I did not forbid any recruitment officers from coming in. They came all they wanted. I forbade any men in my town from applying.”

“Wait, you, what?”

“Abby, Lewis told me he was eager to join the military, to go and fight, to become a man. I told him if he did, he would be abandoning his parents to the responsibility of burying him someday, and for that, he would find no welcome back among us. I told him not to be so eager to go and die.”

For the first time since she arrived, Abby took a step away from Connie. “Connie,” she stammered. “You can’t mean that. That was his choice.”

The baron glared at her. “You would wish a boy you saw grow up to go and die?” he demanded with sudden fierceness.

“Of course not!” Abby answered indignantly. “I would wish him to value life! But what does it matter if that’s what I wish, or you wish? He must wish it! He has to figure that out.”

“Well, he didn’t. He was wrong, and he would have tortured himself and everybody who knew him. I saved him instead.”

“Listen, Connie. There were many boys in Mersey Chapel who went off to fight. Most came back.”

“Randal didn’t. Your dear friend, Mrs. Tillery, has to pay for

that. Wouldn't you have wished to prevent her pain?"

"And what would you have had me do? Crack him over the head with a stone and shackle him to my father's forge in secret? For years, until the war was over? It's a tragedy, what befell him. But all I could do was wish him luck. It's the only right I had."

"And if you were a countess back then, you would let him go?"

"He was never mine to keep! I would have shown care and comfort to that sweet boy. And now I pray for his soul."

"Well, a dead man can't show his gratitude, can he?"

Abby's temper flared. "You, vile, reprehensi—"

"Abby," he interrupted, "let me be plain and to the point! Do you really think I'm the only man in Britain who prevents his youngest, strongest men from leaving? I've met many barons, counts, and earls who protect their "investments" as they call them; and to keep the empire from badgering them, they simply pay a fee to the crown! It's extortion. Lieutenant Westmeyer demanded it of me too, and I refused on principle. The money would have just gone to pay for more rifles, for more cannons, for more bodies! I won't kill boys one way in place of another. I will only pay in consequences, to myself."

It had been so lovely being in Connie's sweet embrace a moment ago, Abby thought. And his words now, in their own way, filled her with pride and made her love him all the more. So why did this silence have to be so painful?

"In the past," Connie continued, once the silence became unbearable, "Westmeyer has threatened me with incarceration. It was easier, in those days, to frighten him off. A mere lieutenant arresting nobility? Over an infraction? You've met him; he's such a sycophant, he wouldn't dare risk his career over any even slightly dubious conflict. But then he met Lewis and found a way to spin all this as treason. Now he can keep me here."

"For how long?"

"Until my trial, I assume."

"There's a trial?"

"No. I've heard nothing of a trial. I have heard no formal charges, actually. I suspect that Westmeyer is so worried about the weakness of his accusation that he does not wish to escalate the situation, lest his straw spine be tested. Instead, he put me here, and waits for my will to break."

"Then break it."

Connie's jaw dropped, just a little. "What?"

"Just pay him. Please, Connie. Come back with me. I miss you." She could feel her hands shaking. She held back the tears.

"Oh, Abby," he said to her, emotion thickening his voice. "If it were that easy, I would surrender my entire fortune to come back with you, to spend my days with you forever. But if I did that, I would be saying that what people like Westmeyer do to others is right. And that I tolerate it. And even that I agree with it. And you would spend your days living with that kind of man."

"I would still love you, Connie."

Silence.

"Abby," Connie breathed. "You have to know – you must understand that if you love me, I became what you love because of what I believe in."

Abby stood in place for almost a minute, maybe more, wondering if there was a way to change his mind. But she knew in her broken heart that all she could say was "I love you."

So she leaned in, kissed him softly, and left the cell, letting the door clank heavily behind her. The young guard, seeing the door close, looked from the door to his caplock, seemingly wondering if he could use it.

"Take me to my coach," she said.



* * *

The morning sun began its late rise over the horizon on a cold March day. Its light bounced off the brass metal of the interior of the Bath Hotel lobby. Everything glistened with piercing clarity. A rush up the stairs, down the hall, winding around corners, more stairs, the large doors to the upper suite.

They flung open, and George Pendleton looked up from a cup of fine black tea, his eyes wide at the sudden intrusion, but freezing when seeing the intruder.

"What must I do?" asked Abby, her tear-stained cheeks under the reddest eyes.

George Pendleton continued to stare, before smiling as warmly as his massive grin would allow.

“Oh Abigail,” he said. “Come in and sit down.”

“I believe you already understand the reality of the situation, my dear young Abby. It is hard to imagine you could have become Countess of Oakfield and not be aware of what such a responsibility entails. And I am not simply referring to the economic responsibilities of collecting taxes on lands and businesses, or the managerial responsibilities of overseeing the protection of a population. No, that is all little more than lessons in calculating numbers and tabulating figures. If you can teach a simpleton to do arithmetic, then, strictly speaking, any such simpleton could become a baron or a king or a count; no, no, that is not the true responsibility of a countess. No, the reality I refer to is one that I, most certainly, have felt even as a boy, ever since my own parents imbued in me the truth of my nobility, even if it were merely a position as lowly as baron.

“The reality I refer to, the one you must know, is the social obligation. Regardless of how much land you own, regardless of how much industry you possess, how wealthy or paupered, or how famed or how ignored you are, to be a noble is to belong to a status of social being that is, by its construct, designed to rest an echelon or two above those who do not possess such a position. And while this is seen by some who do not possess nobility as an insult to humanity, or as an affront to the dignity of all creatures and persons with life within them, the truth of the matter is that those who possess the nobility of title are the ones who truly suffer, not because of their financial position, but rather because their social position forces them to forever be deemed to live the image of the noble, which, if I may say so, is hardly fortuitous at all.”

Abby wilted on a chaise longue among the opulence that was Baron George Pendleton’s private suite at the Bath Hotel, listening to him speak philosophically on his argument as he sat in his beloved easy chair, which he had graciously turned from its seemingly permanent position towards his study towards her instead. She had never seen this chair move in Pendleton House, and here in the hotel it was placed as if in honor of its old status. But this time, Lord George was gracious enough to turn it towards her, the imagery of the gesture not lost on Abby as she saw how he was giving her his undivided attention. She appreciated it. And she

needed it, now more than ever.

She was a wreck, and his kindness held her firm.

“Please allow me to explain by going into my own experiences for a bit, if you will allow,” continued Lord Pendleton. “You see, The Pendletons are an old family of dignity and grace, though we have largely lost our family fortune. In part it was by virtue of an ancestor of mine funding the wrong side of a war, another not collecting as much wealth from poorer lands as was possible, and then there was the matter of some avaricious and glutinous family members who decided to use too much wealth to bury too little dignity underneath a tidal wave of pleasure. We became a family of nobles in name only. The family fortune was gone.”

Abby sat among the final remnants of this fortune, the decorations and furnishings of George’s private hotel suite, which were all he could rescue from Pendleton House. Her chaise longue was only the beginning, for it rested upon an Arabian carpet, not far from a tiger skin rug, silken window shades, an ornate globe next to an ostentatious credenza, all underneath beautiful paintings hanging from the walls, and religious imagery decorating the ceiling high above. Even her drink spoke volumes of Pendleton class: the porcelain china teacup she held was filled with hot and relaxing Indian tea leaves, which cleared her mind after the expensive scotch served to her in a crystal glass upon her entrance to this abode.

“As a boy, I had it drilled into me – curiously enough, by many of these same still-living relatives who frittered away our wealth – the importance of the Pendleton name, the Pendleton image, the Pendleton pride! It was, therefore, my responsibility as a Pendleton, not to allow my family history to waste into nothing.”

Abby looked at George, as he seemed to sink his chin into his own chest in deep contemplation. “It is for this reason that when Thomas Gatling offered me a rather hefty financial dowry to take his daughter off his hands, I accepted the arrangement as made by my parents without much argument. Or, for that matter, fanfare. I simply needed to fill my family’s coffers. Had I known that my parents would drain most of it and my dear wife would waste the rest, I probably would have thought twice about trusting my family’s financial future to them. Sometimes, I wonder what would my life have been like if I could have shared it with some pretty young thing for whom I cared more than anything.”

Abby looked at the Lord's sad face as it hung down upon his chest and felt the same sort of sympathy for him she had felt yesterday. For all the tragedy that befell her due to the horrid Mrs. Pendleton and her rotten children, here was a man who was a soul of noble and true intentions, who could cry his pain out of those glassy eyes of his if only he would allow himself a crack in his dignified veneer. She was grateful that he had found her lover. Despite what happened, she was grateful to this caring man.

Lord Pendleton looked up, and their eyes met. Abby could see just a twinge of embarrassment in his gaze at being caught so vulnerable. It made her heart ache, just a little.

"But," the Lord continued, brushing off the moment, "there's no need to reflect endlessly on fantasies of what could have been and what I lost. Children and young lovers can wish for those things to all their hearts' content. But, to return to my original point, Countess, that is not a luxury a baron has. No, I made my choices and I live with the repercussions. And the choices I made, though they were very hard, were the correct ones. I knew I had been given responsibility over a family history long removed from innocence. I chose to protect the name of Pendleton by any means necessary, and I chose it proudly.

"And, well, look at the result! Rather than waste away a penniless fop, for my private heirlooms to be sold off by my unpaid servants after discovering my lonely corpse, I did make the Pendleton name a recognizable one once more, during my lifetime. I paid taxes and sent soldiers to the war against Napoleon, I enriched the granaries and textile mills of the empire. Why, at one time, the old king even knew my name and acknowledged me in court! The Pendletons were respected, even feared, thanks to my efforts. And the people of Mersey Chapel were able to live lives of relative freedom and innocence, even if I could not. By such graces, I argue that I was a good baron, watching over my flock, and sacrificing to do it."

Abby smiled at her benefactor, lowering her tea from her lips. "It sounds like you have no complaints, no regrets. Are you happy with where you are now, as a result?"

George Pendleton smiled at her again. "My dear Abby, if you had asked me but two years ago, I could have said I was, if perhaps with some small reservations. But, just because that part of my life worked out the way I saw fit, it does not provide me with a happily-

ever-after to end my life's story. Perhaps you heard about the rather insulting tone some people use when referring to the Pendletons today. I was, indeed, a respectable figure among the upper class when I was younger. But being robbed and abandoned by disreputable children and divorced by a woman most see as a grievance has a way of turning peoples' minds away from everything you achieved in life. I am little more than an outcast today, a social pariah to be ignored or jeered at behind my back. And now, with the wealth I was able to recover now mostly taken by my wife, I find myself in the same position as the foolish Pendletons that came before me." He placed his glass down upon his end table and rose to his feet, swaying only slightly. "I feel I carry quite a perspective on the past, and thus, a fair amount of wisdom."

George Pendleton crossed the short distance of the Arabian carpet to Abby, and, extending his hand to her, he waited patiently for her to put down her tea and take it.

"What is this?" Abby asked as he raised her to her feet.

I would like to continue this conversation further, but you have had a most distressing night, and I thought a little bit of air and a change of scenery would do you well. If you would come with me, My Lady? I was planning a coach ride through the city and surrounding countryside and I hope you would be so gracious as to accompany me."

It was true, Abby knew, that she was in no state to relax. "Actually, that would be rather nice," she answered, before he turned and led her to the door of the suite.

Just outside the door, Abby reached for her winter coat, to find that Lord Pendleton had taken it from the hook and now held it for her to slip her arms into. It was a sweet gesture, she thought to herself, and she gratefully accepted the small kindness. As they made their way down to the hotel lobby, she mused how nice it was to have a friend like George Pendleton in these rough times. He was a good-hearted confidant and a welcome voice of reason, at once protective and considerate of her needs. In the little time she had known him, he had treated her kindly and soothed the wounds she sustained in her heart. Life felt almost normal for a time.

In these last several weeks, her mind had been almost exclusively on the turmoil her life had become. She had come to London to celebrate in her love for Conrad, only to have that love

kidnapped and held for ransom – a ransom that Conrad himself refused to pay. After she had spent all that time desperately struggling to recover from illness and find him. Everything she had done these past several weeks seemed to result in either suffering, or loss.

She worried that it really was all her fault. After attaining her position of countess, her life had been relatively stress-free, idyllic in many ways. The idea of coming to London to determine the fates of two boys from her home village – no matter how much she wished to believe it, really did seem like a pretense to have fun. And what did that accomplish, Abby thought? The man she went to see to ask about these boys – Lieutenant Ulrich Westmeyer, Undersecretary to the Secretary for the State of War – wouldn't lift a finger for her, and simply used her trip as an opportunity to advance his own career. She had led Connie straight into his clutches, and only so she could have a nice trip with him. It made her feel dirty and wretched inside to think that all this was because being a countess had made her so self-interested. She was making a mess of things. After all this pain, having somebody treat her like royalty was a welcome balm on her spirit.

She hadn't gotten a chance to say thank you to Lord Pendleton, but whenever he looked at her, with his deep, glassy eyes, she smiled. Perhaps that would be enough.

Stepping out of the lobby, Lord Pendleton presented to Abby a coach of simple, yet elegant, design, at once lovely without being showy or obtrusive. When he motioned to the driver the boy leaped off his seat and opened the door for Abby, who lifted her dress to step in.

He gave a quick order to the driver and they were away. Abby looked out her window at the slowly melting snow, revealing more and more of the city to her as spring approached. Ladies in furs walked the streets with gentlemen in beaten toppers as they went about their day. Poor merchants sold food from crates on the roadside as they turned to ride on a road alongside the Thames.

"It's quite a sight, isn't it?" George said, observing the city with her. "I have traveled extensively throughout England, though most of my time was spent going back and forth between London and Manchester, including, of course, my property in Mersey Chapel. So I have had the luxury of comparing the city to the countryside. Once I become acclimatized to one, I almost forget what it's like to

live in the other, and I get to experience it like new. It is a truly unique experience falling in love with a new adventure over and over again. Sometimes I feel it keeps me young.”

“My good Lord Pendleton,” Abby blurted out, “forgive me for interrupting. You have been most kind to me. I have had a most horrendous night, and you have been an absolute dear to care for me so. But I must be direct; what is all this about? Your youth, your divorce, this ride? I don’t know what to do about the baron, and I seek advice, Lord Pendleton.”

He looked her over briefly, and with his bottom lip fiddled with his mustache. “Abby,” he finally said, “I said all that because I need you to understand where I am coming from with my advice. I believe you should reject Baron Conrad Wallen.”

Abby barely noticed the coach’s progress towards the Chelsea Reach as she silently stared into the infinity of the horizon. The air had become thick around her. It was as cold as sinking into the depths of the Thames.

She turned to Pendleton and said, “I need you to explain yourself. The wisdom and kindness you have shown me are the only reason I don’t leap from this coach right now.”

“And under other circumstances, I would not blame you, My Lady,” replied the other baron. “But this is, in its own sad way, the responsibility of nobility. Consider that Baron Wallen believes himself to be correct in his stance that he is refusing to pay what effectively amounts to bribe money to the military. He believes he is standing up for something important, and that he believes in something.

“But also consider that when you implored him to do what he had to in order to attain release, when you laid out your feelings for the man, he insisted that you would not respect him if he compromised his morals. I therefore put to you that one of his guiding lights in his darkened prison, is that no matter what happens to him, he could believe in you. My dear Abby, I apologize if what I say causes you grief, but I believe that, as long as Baron Conrad thinks you are there for him, his heart will drive him to stand up for his morals.”

Abby’s jaw dropped. “But that...that is not correct! I told him he has my blessing to simply pay the lieutenant and be done with all this, and yet still he refused!”

“If I may rely on my own wisdom, my good lady, a man’s heart

is not so straightforward. Men, particularly men with position and pride – and I believe I know a thing or two about that – see their honor as definitive of their quality. Simply having your lady amour give you permission to be weak does not change, in his mind, the fact that he surrendered. Though, forgive my phrasing of the matter! I simply mean to say that that young Conrad would disapprove of what he chose to do, if he lowers himself in his own mind, even if you would raise him in yours.”

“Do you mean to say that he’s trying to impress me?!”

“I mean to say that he sees your approval of his choices as his greatest shining light. That once he frees himself as a great moral hero, that your admiration of his strength of character will be his eternal joy. And that, no matter how difficult the journey is right now, he will carry out his intentions to fruition, in order to reach such a dream. My Lady, when you look back at how he acted last night – his insistences, his determination – can you honestly say he doesn’t reach for a greater and nobler ideal?”

“Yes, but...”

“And can you honestly say he has any ideal greater than you?”

Abby stared at the man, completely dumbfounded. The coach continued to bump along, turning north through the countryside.

“You are not at fault here,” said Lord Pendleton. “But you must come to terms with the fact that as long as he believes you will worship him for his steadfast courage, he will maintain it even if he has an easy route out of his imprisonment. If you divorce yourself from his love, if you release him and show him he has no woman for whom he may sacrifice himself, I can reasonably assure you that, unless he is a fool, he will see there is no point to his stubbornness. He will simply pay the lieutenant and move on with his life. By releasing him from the bonds of love, you will be freeing him from his shackles that he has placed upon himself. You will be saving him!”

“I will be tearing him apart,” Abby replied. She wasn’t even looking at Pendleton. She could only see the length of Connie’s life, free from imprisonment, somewhere far from her side. It was a torturous visage.

Baron Pendleton continued, looking earnestly into Abby’s face. “This is what it means to govern. It is not the money, and not the luxury, but the understanding that you are a countess. You are where you are in life because you have the innate strength to do

what is right. Think of all those poor souls we saw on the streets of London. If they were now in your place, they would weep and wail at the tragedy that befell them. But you? You see that by hurting yourself, you are sacrificing a part of your life to improve the life of another. That is why I believe you will be a formidable countess."

The coach continued over the country roads, riding north towards Kensington.

"I saw the countess within you years ago, Abby."

Abby's tearing eyes looked up at George. "What?"

"Abby, sweet Abby," the Lord Pendleton said, calmly. "Have you ever had a bout of anxiety about your new role? Especially recently, with what's been happening in your life?"

Abby felt it. She hadn't spoken it aloud for many weeks, however. When she last spoke of it, it was to Connie. In sadness.

"I had learned that two boys from Mersey Chapel had terrible fates in the fight against Napoleon," she said. "One is shutting himself off from the world, and the other is dead. I came here to learn their fates, what happened to them. And yet I have come to understand that my motivation in coming to London was also for the sheer enjoyment such a journey would bring. I question whether I can truly be the capable countess you tell me I could be. Could I sacrifice myself to the responsibility of it, like you have? Spend all my life suffering for the greater good? George, I fear...I fear that I know myself well enough to know that I cannot."

The coach was returning to the city. Baron Pendleton looked contemplative, almost fidgety, before finally speaking up. "My dear, I remember meeting you all those years ago, a scared little fawn introduced into my abode as a maid. I do, really. I remember looking upon you and feeling nothing but love for this poor girl who deserved so much better in life. But when I looked deep in your eyes, I saw ambition, determination, dreams. I feared for what would happen to you in my household, and I curse myself now for not having the strength or gumption to save you then, because I could see a wonderful person in who you were. Abby, if you lost every last penny, every touch of veneer that came from your position as countess, I can promise you that I would see in you the wonderful, beautiful person that you truly are inside, no matter what your title or namesake, just as I did then. You fear that being a countess will ruin you. I argue that, if you saw yourself as I see you, you would see that a woman such as yourself would conquer that

position. You would be the one to make it grand.”

He had a way with words, Abby thought to herself. She was so burdened with anxiety that she had never imagined what it would feel like to have all her pain washed away by such cleansing, sweet words. With that, Abby began to cry, overwhelmed with embarrassment, at having such a weight lift from her shoulders.

“My dear!” cried George. “All you all right?”

“I am,” she whispered. “I promise I am. I’m just rather overwhelmed by all this. I appreciate what you’re saying to me, and I trust you. I simply fear that, even though I know what I must do, I haven’t the strength to do it.”

“I understand completely,” said George Pendleton. “That is the curse of being alone. Which is why, my, uh, next request will not be...easy, or even sound reasonable. However, I must ask you to consider it honestly, and understand that I have reasons behind my madness.”

“Madness?” Abby replied. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Abby,” the baron said weakly, “in addition to rejecting a life with Baron Wallen, I ask you not to remain an unmarried woman. I ask you to marry me.”

They rode along until the end of Hyde Park in stunned silence.

“You’re right, that is rather mad,” Abby replied, dazed.

“It would seem that way,” George said nervously. “But understand what I mean. I have been married most of my life. I understand what is in the hearts of men and women. I do not expect you to throw yourself upon the opportunity. But what I do expect is that when you abandon Baron Wallen, the satisfaction you will gain from saving him will be a cold comfort in the face of your responsibility. It is very easy – and believe me, I know what it is to do what you think is right, and punish yourself for years, even decades, for it. And I have no intention of lying to you and saying my decision would be entirely unselfish. If I knew I had a hand in your sorrow, I would hate myself. I would never forgive myself for walking away from you, knowing I can help.”

“Help? By marrying me?”

“By caring, Abby. By sharing my life, my sorrows, and my sympathies with you. I said to you not long ago, that I, in my weaker moments, dreamed what it would be like to marry out of love, rather than out of responsibility. The fact is that our partnership would be politically convenient, though I swear it on

my life that that is purely circumstantial. When I look at you, I see a soul I wish my former wife had when I married for advantage. I see a wonderful person who needs me as much as I need her.

“Again, I insist, I have no delusions. I am many years your senior, and am aware that I am nobody’s ideal choice at my age. I am open to any interests you may have in children, though I would never pressure you into that circumstance with me, at my age. I also understand that you may have different feelings for me than romantic ones. Perhaps you love me, perhaps you see me as a dear friend, perhaps I am somebody you may look up to. I simply listen to the way you speak to me, the way you relax around me, and I find it hard to believe that you would not be happy to spend time with me. I know what it is to be in an unhappy marriage, and I will even swear it on bended knee if I must, that I will see to it that the years you spend with me will be filled with pleasure. For I would make it my mission to see to your happiness.

“For, whatever you may think of me, when I saw you re-enter my life yesterday, I knew that I cared for you. With all my heart.”

As the coach continued its journey back towards Piccadilly, Abby felt like she hadn’t felt in ages. Like every fiber of her being had grown so warm that she melted with every word. She clasped her hand over her mouth before finding the composure to speak again.

“My goodness,” she said. “Most men just say ‘Will you marry me?’ I will say, I commend your flair.”

“Then... is that a yes?”

“George, for goodness sake, you proposed to me barely a day after seeing me. I’m going to need some time to consider. Please grant me that.”

They both laughed a little. It hurt to laugh.

“At the very least,” said Abby, “I do have to send a letter to Connie. I owe him that much. I have to make this right.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less from you than that, Abby,” replied Baron Pendleton. “I laid quite a bit upon you today, after what I assume was a night of tragedy and tears, and a month of worry. I promise you, I’ve waited almost all my life to find happiness. Waiting a little more would not be a tragedy to me, if it meant that happiness was you.”

“Thank you, George.”

“Most certainly, Abby. May I direct the driver to take you back

to your hotel rather than mine?”

“I should certainly hope so.” She was silently looking out the window at London passing by as George opened a slit in the coach to yell orders at the boy driving. Abby could see a young man on crutches, still garbed in a uniform, moving through life with all his remaining strength. “May I say one last thing to you, George?”

“I hope it’s not the last,” mused Pendleton.

“As to what I think of you...you are beautiful, deep down inside.”

The coach pulled up to her hotel, where she stepped off. She was grateful he didn’t try to kiss her – there was far too much to deal with already, given everything that had happened today. She turned to look at him again, he smiled warmly at her with such innocent happiness. He carried that smile upon his face, as his coach continued on around the corner and disappeared from view.

Abby turned towards her hotel. This wasn’t going to be easy.

Chapter Ten

London England
April 1814

When Ellie was determined to do something, Abby thought, she would not only do it, but she would kick down any opposition and move the entire world itself in order to get it done. If she needed to clean her home while also getting the farming done, and whip her father and brothers into shape, she could. If she wanted to match every London local at insults during 9-pins, she could. If she wished to learn how to draw, and draw well, and use that very skill to bring a smile to her best friend's face, well, there was no stopping her. Abby had many old friends from growing up in Mersey Chapel, but Ellie, whom she had met barely nine months before, had been so kind, so open, and so tender with her that she could not describe her as anything less than her best friend. There was nobody else she could trust implicitly to get the job done.

And she had two jobs today for Ellie, both of which were imperative.

Her first job was a private commission, of sorts. As Ellie worked from her seat by the credenza of Abby's hotel room, she planted her graphite sticks and extra papers on the furniture as she labored to draw her subject perfectly.

Abby had chosen this angle so Ellie could plant her subject right by the window as the sun shone through the glass. Backlit this way, Abby was surrounded by a gorgeous halo, billowing radiant enchantment around her gentle frame, making her blonde hair shine, her gentle cheeks blush and glow, and her eyes look deep and mysterious.

"I daresay, M'Lady," Ellie muttered, concentrating, "I could draw you forever if you always looked this beautiful! Like starlight, you are!"

"Well," Abby said through clenched teeth, struggling to keep as still as possible, "don't forget my surroundings. I need the whole

picture to look beautiful; not just me.”

Another five minutes, and Ellie put the graphite away and picked up a bottle filled with alcohol to spray the image on the sheet.

“I think I’m finished!” she said proudly, holding out the drawing.

Abby looked it over as Ellie watched her reaction. In the time Abby had been in hospital in February, Ellie, the ever-loyal friend, had sat by her bedside to see her get well in due time. Abby knew she had taken up drawing to pass the time as Abby’s companion. But seeing the pose in the image, which was based on some strategic elements Abby had described, and also from her own imagination, Abby was struck by the way her mousy little handmaiden from Oakfield had become the finest artist she had ever seen.

“Oh, Ellie,” Abby breathed. “It’s so touching! It’s perfect!”

Ellie blushed and giggled. “Well, no need to be insulting, M’Lady. If it was perfect, I’d have nowhere to go from here but down, now would I?”

Abby laughed as she watched Ellie spray more alcohol on the paper. “Yes, you’re right, I suppose, there’s always room for improvement. Speaking of which, there’s graphite on your teeth.” A pause, and then, “Why do you spray it with alcohol?”

“Is a fixative trick I learned,” Ellie answered. “You ever fold a picture like this, or rub it, or rest something on it, and the graphite smears, ruining your work? So, spray a bit of this, and it hardens on the paper, so to speak.”

“I see. Can you still draw or write on it now?”

“It may be a bit too damp now, M’Lady. I’d say you let it dry.”

“Good. Leave it next to your materials; let it dry in the sunlight.” Abby watched Ellie carefully put it away.

And now it was time for Abby’s second job for Ellie. Abby slipped her hand into a nearby drawer and removed a letter.

“Ellie,” Abby said, “this time spent with you in London, during all the tragedy that has befallen me, you have always been my silver lining. I will always cherish these happy memories we’ve had with each other, from your games on the Thames, to your silly spinning on the gas lights.”

“Why, Countess,” Ellie said, looking perturbed, “you are starting to sound as if you are saying goodbye!”

“For a time, I am,” answered Abby. “There is a purse for my father and an urgent message that must, *must* be delivered to Mersey Chapel in all haste. Take this message,” she showed Ellie the address. “He must be told what has transpired here in London, and I hesitate to commit all of it to writing. I would trust no one else with it.”

“Oh, M’Lady!” Ellie said, sniffing.

“Therefore,” Abby continued, “I ask you to go immediately. Here is some coin to cover your expenses on the road.” She passed Ellie a fat purse. “Please be safe, my darling Ellie,” she said.



* * *

London, England
April 1814

“Lady Somerville! I must insist you stop at once! *Lady Somerville!*”

Abby marched through the halls of the Horse Guards in London, scowling fiercely. She made her way around familiar turns, past portraits and icons of military rule while holding clenched fists and maintaining a determined gait towards a familiar office. As various officers hurried after her, begging her to halt, Abby wagered that, if they wouldn’t be stopped from arresting her due to her fierce demeanor, then perhaps they would still let her pass by virtue of not wishing to be seen grabbing a woman. Or perhaps not wishing to offend a countess.

“Lady Somerville, in the name of Lord Bathurst, I am giving you a final warning! You are not to proceed any further!”

Abby sincerely hoped that her position or gender or demeanor would be enough, since she knew full well she wasn’t very angry at all. Rather, she was terrified.

She was storming Lieutenant Westmeyer’s office – and hoping nobody would figure out how scared she was.

“My Lady, you cannot—” A man reached for her and she

recoiled.

“You will exercise caution with your wretched hands and bring me straight to the Undersecretary this very instant unless you wish to be dishonoured and jailed tonight for assaulting my person! ”

Abby rounded a corner, hoping they would take her heightened color and shortness of breath as anger. She knew she couldn't keep up this level of false bravado for very long.

After a few more busts and those same peeling blank walls, she came upon a very familiar office door. She pressed it open with a forceful shove.

Within, Abby saw the lieutenant about to drink his afternoon tea. Westmeyer sat in his decorated office, hunched over, extended lips blowing gently over steaming black tea in the tiniest porcelain china teacup. His eyes went quite wide, looking up towards his invader. Abby would have snickered, if not for the fact that she was busy maintaining the image of rage.

“WHERE IS HE?! I KNOW HE'S HERE! I KNOW YOU HAVE HIM LOCKED AWAY SOMEWHERE IN THESE HALLS! WHERE IS HE?!” she cried loud enough to shake the confidence of all her pursuers.

“I am so terribly sorry, sir,” cried one of the lads. “Please forgive me! I struggled to make her know she could not—”

“I understand, I understand,” said the undersecretary. He placed his teacup on the desk and rose slowly with a gentle motion to the guards. “I will handle this. Please excuse us. It will be quite all right.”

Abby watched, glaring sternly, as the younger officers scurried away into the depths of the Horse Guards before turning back to Westmeyer.

“Yes,” he said, once they were alone. “There it is. You came in with quite a show of force, my fair Countess. But if I may offer some advice, if you are to portray false anger with genuine ferocity, you must never lose your spirit to do so. It is revealing your hand to storm in here with false anger, only to have your falsity revealed when I can witness it.”

He had shown her up quite well, Abby thought. But she was not in the mood.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

“Why, Countess,” replied the undersecretary, “he's still in the Old Bailey; I never moved him.”

“No, not him!” she interrupted. “Planter! Lewis Planter! The

boy! Where are you keeping him?"

"Oh!" said Westmeyer. He seemed genuinely taken aback. "Well...I mean, yes, he's here in our care. He's a witness. I'm afraid I cannot have you bring him to any harm."

"Do you expect me to lunge at him with a weapon? Or perhaps my bare fists? He must answer for his choices! He has a part to play in all this, and I will come to understand it. I want answers from him."

"While I do understand your disappointment in the boy, I am not in the habit of allowing anybody to simply walk in and commence an interrogation!"

"And are you in the habit of holding men in cells indefinitely if they do not fatten your pockets?"

At that, the undersecretary grew dark red under his collar and shook as if he was struggling to burst from it. "You...you just... cannot—"

"For goodness sakes, Ulrich, I have no intention of harming anybody, nor do I wish to spend any more time around you after what you've done! I have no interest in going to war with you! I just want to ask him a few things. After what you've done—with him and with Baron Wallen—letting me see the boy is the very least you could do."

Lieutenant Westmeyer looked at Abby most sourly. Abby thought it the kind of glare an impudent little boy gives his mother when he is angry with her, but knows he can do nothing other than glare.

"I will be accompanying you," replied the lieutenant, "and you will have five minutes." He straightened his uniform and made his way out his office door, muttering, "I want this done with already."

"Of course," Abby replied as she followed him down the hall, uninvited. "We wouldn't want your tea to get cold."

It was a short and tense walk, but rather than sink deeper into the depths of the building, as with the Old Bailey, Abby found herself exiting the rear of it, into an open field of lovely greenery. Evidently, when the horses of the Guard needed exercise or a respite from duty, their riders could bring them to this small field for a time. She walked quickly, keeping up with the pace of the undersecretary before her as they headed for what appeared to be some sort of storage shed underneath a canopy of trees. It was there that Lieutenant Westmeyer halted and knocked upon the door.

From within came a familiar voice, "I'm here."

The lieutenant turned a latch on a simple exterior lock.

When Westmeyer opened the door to the shed, she stepped inside to find it had been converted into a simple residence, complete with table, chairs, a hearth, and a cooking pot. There were even a few decorations and a deck of cards. It was comfortable, but the sole window was barred. It was obvious that the occupant of such an apartment might not exactly be a prisoner, but he wasn't allowed to leave.

The occupant himself turned to look at the door. Lewis Planter must have been expecting somebody else, because his eyes widened at Abby in shock. "L-Lady...Abby, or, Lady Abigail, I..."

"It's Lady Somerville of Oakfield," interrupted the countess. "Though I'm not surprised you don't remember my name, as I wonder if you ever cared to know it at all."

Lewis continued to look scared, and his eyes darted from Abby to the lieutenant and back again. "What's going on?" he asked.

"What is going on, Lewis, is that you are going to show me what a decent man you can be by answering my questions. I have no time for little boys hiding in holes because their mother's skirts are too far away."

At that, Lewis looked upset. Abby wasn't even trying to affect him so quickly, and yet, somehow, she had apparently struck a nerve.

"Yes, I am a boy, aren't I," whined Lewis. "A real man wouldn't have to be hidden away from the world, would he? But what do I know about that? I'm not allowed to be a real man. Now, anyone can just burst into my cell and make wicked fun of me!"

Abby saw the anger and frustration in the boy's face, and she knew why he was speaking this way. "Lewis," she said more calmly, "I learned recently that Baron Conrad wouldn't allow you to join the army in the fight against the French."

"That's right."

"Well," she continued, "I believe he should have allowed you to make a choice for yourself."

At this, Lewis looked shocked once more. "Really? You feel that —"

"But," Abby interrupted, "that doesn't change the fact that you made the wrong decision."

Lewis's slight smile faded quickly. "And what would you know

about that, M'Lady? Am I to spend my days potting flowers and mending fabrics while men who have seen battle mock me? As they bring their ladies to come and giggle at the milk coursing through my veins? These are supposed to be my threshold years, when I become a real man! I don't deserve to have my glory stolen from me by an old coward!"

"Lewis, war is not a game. You would have no 'formative years' if you died. Baron Conrad wished to teach you to take pride in your own life, and I wish he'd done a better job of it. But you know as well as I do that your insistence that the baron is a traitor for France is just a vengeful pretense."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Lewis, turning to her derisively. "Do you know anything of loyalty and passion? Men – I mean real men – would fight for England if they were really English."

"You're just lashing out," Abby said, narrowing her eyes. "I will waste no more of my time here. I came to inform you that I know you're lying, and to tell you that when the time comes, I expect you to do the right thing."

She left him in his abode and shut the door behind her.

Abby didn't bother going back inside the Horse Guards. Already outdoors, she decided to reach the main courtyard by circling the building rather than by traipsing through those musty old halls. Regrettably, the least appealing occupant of the Horse Guards was still hot on her heels.

"He's a misinformed child," Abby said to Westmeyer, not slowing her pace, "and he's convinced manliness and war are synonymous!"

"I agree with him," interjected the lieutenant. "There are many who wish to make their lives in the army."

"But rather than make something of his life as it is, he plays the victim, and lashes out at a man who only meant to help him, because he cannot do whatever he wants! He's like a babe, flailing his fists and wailing because he doesn't know any better!"

"He would be treated as a man in the..."

"You're just using him and you know it!" she scolded, stopping in her tracks and turning to face the lieutenant. "You couldn't care less about him unless you can use him to kill your foreign enemies, or help you incarcerate a local one! You're just angry Baron Conrad won't pay you, so you beat your fists until you get what you want, as well! You're no better than that boy, and you're supposed to be

old enough to know better! Ulrich, you're going after targets of your own creation just to advance your career. Don't you have any morality?"

It was the lieutenant's turn to pale and then flush with anger.

"When all is said and done, My Lady," he finally answered, "we all come to the same morbid end. What matters in this Earthly realm is what we choose to do with the time we have. All anybody truly wants is to be happy. I will not apologize for seeking my happiness and fulfillment in a life of comfort and ease."

He smiled coldly at Abby now, as if he had shared the secret of the universe, and then his eyes drifted away from her as though she had ceased to exist. Abby stared after him as he left, and then she turned and continued back to her coach.



* * *

My Dearest Baron Conrad,

I send this letter to you with a trust based on all the time we have spent together and all the love we have shared. Read this letter thoroughly, front to back, and understand the true meaning deep within my heart.

I cannot lead you on any further, my dear Conrad. I cannot pretend that there will ever be a future for the two of us together. Though it pains me to write it, I regret I must reject your proposal for marriage and sever the connection between us, romantic and otherwise.

I do not wish you to think there was nothing between us during more innocent times. To love you was a joy, and to be loved by you, a treasure. And I do wish that, if things had been different, we would have the luxury to carry on our lives as we wish.

But we both know that is not the fate that befalls people in our position. I am not a mere farm girl or the daughter of a shop owner. I am a countess, and as such, responsible for the livelihood of my county and its people. You understand something of this in your own right as a baron, and yet you have chosen to endanger your position for personal principles. This action has shamed you in the eyes of the Crown. By

making choices I couldn't possibly support, you have taken a different course in life, and it must diverge from mine.

No matter how I felt about you in the past, you have become a damaging person to be associated with. As a countess, I cannot spend my days justifying the actions of an incarcerated husband with a criminal record against the empire. I have responsibilities. I will have to carry them out alone.

If it is any consolation, I can feel my heart breaking at what I know I must do. At least I can tell myself that, thanks to your place in my life and my memories, I have grown a little wiser. And for that, I thank you.

Please be strong, and know that you are a good person who will someday find a suitable wife. Please forgive me. You are a cherished soul, and I will always remember what you've given me.

*Sincerely,
Countess Abigail Somerville of Oakfield Manor*

George Pendleton wore spectacles while reading the letter. Despite this, he still had to lean down and squint his eyes.

Abby held the letter before him like a tablet or a painting, keeping it as steady as possible.

"May I hold it? It will be easier to see," he said.

Abby pulled the letter away from him when he reached for it. "No, no," she said. "The ink may still be wet; I'll hold it. I simply wished for your opinion. It means a lot to me." George Pendleton looked at her warmly when she said that to him, standing up straight and looking down into her eyes.

"Well," he answered, "it is indeed direct and to the point overall. But where it is not, you add an emotional context to...make it endearing. Warm. You have a very gentle way with words, Abby. And given the circumstances, I can sincerely say that this heartbreak is unavoidable. If he truly is a man of integrity, he will feel honored to be treated so courteously.

"Oh," he said, seeing that her eyes had filled with tears at the thought, "oh, my dear Abby. Please, come here." Slipping the letter into its packaging, Abby set it aside and rested herself in the arms of this caring man as she freely let her tears flow.

"Dearest Abby," consoled the baron. "I understand what such

actions do to break a woman's heart and make you feel like nothing in this world could ever be beautiful again. But please believe my words, Abby. What you are doing is saving a poor man from a life of hopelessness through your power and position. You are taking the first few steps into a much larger world – a world where you can be a countess, not of luxuries and frivolities, but of decency and nobility. To rise above, and be a great woman."

"Oh George," said Abby, finally wiping away the tears. "George, I must confess what I have done earlier this week. I went to see Lewis Planter. The boy I told you about? Baron Conrad's aid?"

"Really? Why ever would you do so?"

"A moment of desperation, I suppose. Conrad told me so many things about why he wished to prevent his townsfolk from fighting in the wars, and I suppose I needed to hear it from somebody else. I hoped I could change things, or..." Abby released a heavy sigh. "Well, no matter. It was a silly idea. I was just being idealistic, I suppose."

"You were in denial about the end of your relationship with this man," answered Lord Pendleton. "I can forgive you for being desperate to find a way to save your old life. But, rest assured, my Abby – this, too, shall pass. Stay with me, and I will ease your pain and bring happiness to your world."

"George," Abby said breathlessly, looking deep into his eyes. "What you said a few days ago, about how you swore on your life that my being a countess is mere circumstance, and that you wished to be with me for my beautiful soul? Did you really mean it, George?"

"I swore on my life," he answered. "If you were never countess, if you were only the woman who stands before me and nothing more, then I would still love you with all my heart."

"Oh, thank you, George!" She hugged him once more. "I do hope, with all my heart, that our lives will be beautiful."

Abby could feel George Pendleton's body against hers as drew her closer. She held him in her arms, all the while, looking out the windows of his hotel suite into the wider world beyond. It would get better, she told herself. Or, possibly, easier. All in due time.

Chapter Eleven

*London, England
Mid-April, 1814*

Ever since she was a little girl, Abby had heard fantastic tales of grand balls within elegant houses of exquisite refinement, where men and women of rank and position would wear the most fashionable jackets and gowns. They danced beautiful, mesmerizing dances that Abby, having grown up in a little hamlet, had to learn during her education in Shropshire. Pendleton Manor had no dance halls, being a quaint rural manor. Oakfield Manor certainly had the scale, though Lady Charlotte would never allow such joyous dancing anywhere near her. Mersey Chapel and Oakfield held dances on occasion, certainly. But those were country folk dances, livelier than the gentle and sophisticated dancing on air she'd always imagined in the ballrooms of her dreams.

Now she stood before a full-length mirror, her hair done in a complicated manner she would have never imagined possible, her makeup the most pristine and expensive money could buy. And the dress, Abby thought – oh, the dress – was the most breathtaking brilliant white, accented with gold and silver inlays.

Many of her childhood dreams had not come true, Abby reflected, but here she was, looking impossibly elegant and ready to go off to her first ball. There, laying on the mantle within sight of the mirror, rested an invitation she had practically memorized by now: *You are cordially invited to Breadalbane House in Park Lane, London, for a celebration of Napoleon's abdication.* The details were all written in gold ink, and her name was printed in elegant script at the top: Countess Abigail Somerville of Oakfield in Shropshire. Which was, of course, who she was now, Abby thought. Who she always would be.

Abby spun in her dress, stretching her arms out as she slowly circled in place. When she last did so, she had been in Mersey Chapel, and the freezing winter had gotten warm enough to allow

her to walk the hamlet trails, feeling the gentle crystal snowflakes drift downward and dance with her, all the way down the road. She'd had so much to look forward to then. Looking back now, she thought she had been very young and naïve.

So many people in Abby's life – George now, especially – would emphasize that even when one had grown up, there was still much to look forward to. What nobody ever mentioned, Abby realized, was that, through growing older, one actually has the opposite problem one imagines as a child. With the world open to you, there is an abundance of confusion. Youth provides naïveté, certainly, but maturity provides so many ceaselessly blinding options, it's a wonder anything gets done at all.

The ending of one relationship, the start of another. The abandoning of one position, in place of another. The acknowledgment that she had no more use for childish ways, and that, from now on, Abby would take pride in exerting her labors for a greater good.

So maybe, Abby thought, this is why the wealthy have such frivolous parties. To feel free from such pressures, and for one brief night, feel naïve and innocent again.

How incredibly hypocritical, Abby thought to herself. Never in her youth did she imagine she would dislike the idea of ballroom dances. Time really does change everything.

Somewhere, off in the distance, Abby heard running footsteps, and was that...panting? Her door flew open, which startled her, since surely no one would dare to barge in on her like this. Nobody, except...

Abby's eyes went wide, and she turned so quickly she nearly threw herself to the floor. There, before her, was the most welcome sight in the world.

"Ellie!" Abby cried out.

Ellie stood at the threshold of her room, a sweaty, panting mess, hunched over and breathing heavily. With her eyes red and her tongue protruding slightly, she looked ready to collapse.

With one weak hand, Ellie lifted a pair of letters and held them aloft. "If you think I look bad," she finally managed to say in between heaving breaths, "you should see the horse".

Between gentle embraces, Abby pulled Ellie into her room quickly and sat her down as she wiped away her sweat and tears. "Ellie, oh Ellie, it is so wonderful to see you again!" Abby said. "I've

missed you terribly, and wondered such horrible things! I was so afraid something might happen to you and I would be left alone!”

Ellie passed her the letters. “I missed you too, M’Lady. Where else in the world can I spend my time with the queerest countess in England, the only one who treats her handmaiden like a queen?”

They both laughed heartily.

“Well,” Ellie continued, “I wish I had more to explain, but it really is the simplest story you ever would hear. In truth, M’Lady, I rode as hard and as fast as I could. And it took so long because, well, I don’t know if anybody has ever told you this before, M’Lady, but Manchester is VERY FAR AWAY!”

Abby continued to smile as she broke the seal on her first letter and began reading.

“So, I talked wi’ yer’ da,” Ellie continued. “Such a gentleman, don’t know if they tell you tha’. We both went to the magister, McCreadie, and he agreed it is as you see it. Oh! Right! Abby, did you know there’s a boy living with yer’ da? Young fellow, like.”

“Yes, Owen.” Abby didn’t look up, just continued reading until she was done, then began to break the other seal. “He’s my father’s blacksmith apprentice.”

“Aaaaah,” sighed Ellie. “Yes, he said that, yer da, that he was. How old is tha’ boy?”

“About your age, I believe, why?” Abby continued reading.

“No reason,” Ellie said, staring off. “I just never got a chance to talk to him much. Y’know, got the responses for letters, then rushed back here. So, y’know, I never got to talk with him. He just doesn’t seem all that, yah’, old like, I guess. I dunno. Do you figure he fancies any of the ladies in Mersey Chapel?”

Abby stopped reading and slowly turned to look at Ellie, who briefly saw the look in Abby’s eye before blushing and hiding her face away.

This would have been rather cute, Abby thought, in any other moment.

But not this one.

There was a note from her father, of course. That much was expected. But the second letter? That was entirely a surprise.

And it changed everything.



* * *

The Breadalbane House in Park Lane was a marvel of luxury. Where so much of London carried with it the weight of its population – the impoverished, the injured, the desperate – a place like this seemed to separate from the rest of the world and float above it on airs of gold and crystal.

Abby had been here for several hours now and understood the appeal. Brilliant chandeliers illuminated every mirror, the waxed wooden dance floor, and all the walls covered in soft velvet fabrics of royal colors. One could easily get lost in the opulence of this grand façade and put the rest of life, with its world of troubles and sufferings, quite out of mind.

And so it was with all the guests, as the ballroom had flooded this evening with sophisticated revelers. Gentlemen and ladies of London's high life were all drinking and dancing to festive music, full of mirth and admiration for their lovely companions, making all present feel as if victory over life was a deserving achievement. Abby wondered how many of the people here knew the official reason why the party was even arranged. Or were they all just swept up in the grandeur of the dance? Abby realized that this house and the people reminded her of Lord Pendleton's Bath Hotel suite, though on a much larger scale. The same feelings that ran through her mind upon seeing the baron's current residence, with its trinkets and memories of easier days, echoed in her thoughts as she observed the wealth of this place.

She caught sight of Lord Pendleton near the edge of the room and turned in his direction, but hesitated when she saw a second familiar figure approach him. Heads together, they left the ballroom.

Something furtive in the manner of the two men made her feel ill at ease. Hurrying her pace but trying not to be conspicuous, Abby followed the two men down a short hallway, where she caught just a glimpse of Lieutenant Westmeyer's uniform disappearing through a door.

Catching up, she was grateful that the door hadn't been shut quite properly, and glancing over her shoulder first, she peered through the crack.

The conspirators – for by their manner, they were clearly discussing something they didn't want others to know about – were having a hushed conversation near the other side of the room. It was too far for Abby to hear much, but she could see from their behavior that Lieutenant Westmeyer was partly scolding and partly imploring Lord Pendleton to do something.

Lord Pendleton's voice rose in a whine. "If she refuses, then my chance will be lost."

Angry, Westmeyer replied, "Would you prefer to be charged with treason for your part in this?"

Their voices lowered once again, and Abby could make out no more. Nodding slightly to herself, Abby made her way back to the ballroom. She understood matters much better now.

Over the last few weeks, George Pendleton had become a spry and vigorous man, eager to entertain Abby with lessons in dance and carriage rides through all of London. It was an elation, Abby could see quite plainly, that had arisen in him starting the day he had comforted Abby after her tragic rejection letter to Baron Conrad Wallen. Ever since then, George had been practically giddy with glee at the thought that he had won the heart of the beautiful Countess Somerville, who was his newest companion, and, as Abby began to overhear, was rumored to be his fiancée.

In truth, Abby had been carefully vague in her response to Lord Pendleton, never actually saying "yes" or that she would marry him. Rather, she spoke in dreamier language, saying how happy she was and how golden her future would be, or some other such storybook triviality. As long as George was able to celebrate in his happiness at his new love, Abby simply took great care to never lie to him.

And indeed, her rather playful tone and undetermined position had quite an effect on this society, Abby soon learned. It would appear that, in her time far away in Shropshire and Mersey Chapel, rumors in England's high society began to circulate about this beautiful golden-haired young angel who had risen to the position of Countess of Oakfield, seemingly out of nowhere. By the way she was welcomed and introduced to every eager onlooker at the party, Abby came to understand that everybody wished to know more

about her, and she seemed to be a fascinating new toy to play with in their shallow lives. But though she was starting to become accustomed to comments of “so you must be the” so and so, and “the stories don’t do you justice” and whatnot, what intrigued her was everybody’s association of her person to that of Lord George Pendleton. Even though it seemed to Abby that she was alone in her private struggles, Londoners she met often commented, “so you’re here with Baron Pendleton,” or “lucky fellow,” or, most curiously of all, “I guess I was wrong about him.”

Abby should have been confused about that last one, but she knew. Yes, she knew. And as she had the thought, from the glow of the dance hall came George Pendleton himself, approaching Abby with a glowing smile and a posture of confidence. Arms outstretched, he gently embraced her and moved back to look into her sweet visage. Onlookers turned away out of courtesy, though not before admiring the couple with grins and raised eyebrows.

“Abby, my dearest,” said the joyous man, no evidence of his recent confrontation with Westmeyer, “I trust you are having a most exquisite time?”

“This is certainly going to be a night I’ll never forget,” Abby said before tacking on an additional, “thank you for this wonderful evening, My Lord.”

“I am happy to hear it. May have a private word?”

“Yes, certainly.”

Pendleton looked cautious and smiled uncertainly. “I have been approached just now by a man I know caused you much pain, the undersecretary to the Secretary for the State of War. Yes, Lieutenant Ulrich Westmeyer. Unfortunately, he has just informed me that my advice to you has been... somewhat unsuccessful.”

“Advice, you say?”

“Yes. I had suggested to you that by rejecting Baron Wallen, you would break his resolve and encourage him to pay his way out of incarceration. The undersecretary has just informed me that not only has the baron not broken his resolve, but has – almost violently – demanded to be taken to trial, lest he reveal to anybody who will listen the length of his incarceration without one. As you can imagine, the undersecretary has been hounding me all evening over this, and has driven me near to the point of exhaustion.

“As such, he has requested our aid once more. He has called for that Planter boy to be brought to this house this very evening, and

wishes to make public Baron Wallen's treasonous nature. Now, I know you were not expecting this, but...well, darling, if you could possibly explain Baron Wallen's suppression of his constituents, such as Lewis Planter, without embarrassing the poor baron too harshly? If you could do so publicly – here, tonight – then we could also, perhaps, tie your rejection of him to your acceptance of my marriage proposal. I don't mean to pressure you; I promise I do not. It's just that people are starting to wonder what a man of my years is intending with such a young lady, and I was hoping..."

"I understand," Abby said, smiling. "Image is everything."

"Oh! Then, you'll..."

"Lead the way."

George Pendleton looked so relieved by her response that he practically skipped as he grabbed Abby's wrist and pulled her into the ballroom. For her part, she couldn't wait to get in there, either.

Abby entered a hall of great brilliance and splendor, surrounded on all walls by massive mirrors. Each wall reflected the room within and the mirrors opposite, the size of the room seemed to grow ever larger into infinity. The moment she had entered, all eyes darted towards her. In this seemingly infinite room, Abby could not have felt more stifled.

George led her to the center of the room, where they were met by Lieutenant Westmeyer, looking very nervous and out of place, losing what must be half his weight in sweat.

"Are we ready? Is she..."

"Yes, yes, Lieutenant. It's all set; she's going along with it," George responded, in his elation not even casually showing Abby any regard. "Are you quite all right? You look sick."

Westmeyer kept looking towards the doors as he said, "Yes, yes, I'm fine, I just...I have scheduled a very, specific...ah! Yes! Perfect!"

Abby looked to see what had made the undersecretary so relieved. From a side entrance came his witness, Lewis Planter, escorted by four military personnel, drawing all attention to themselves as they brought the boy before Westmeyer.

But Abby's attention was held, quite firmly, by one of the guards: Private Torinson.

Tom.

His eyes met hers, and he smiled.

"Well," said Abby, "let's get started."

Westmeyer looked out at the crowd, and called out, "Ladies and

gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen, my sincerest apologies for interrupting, but may I have your undivided attention for just a moment? Please, stop the music. May I have the floor?"

The music stopped and an expectant hush fell over the room.

"Yes, thank you," continued Westmeyer. "Ladies and gentlemen, I speak to you now as the official representative of Lord Bathurst, Secretary to the State of War and the Colonies. I do apologize for bringing political matters into your evening of relaxation, but please rest assured that I would never dare to do so, if not for the extreme nature of the occasion. But I cannot allow a criminal to continue enjoying the privileges of your esteemed company, to take advantage of your society, all while they work against the moral fabric of England itself! I speak of course...of treason!"

There were a few gasps in the crowd, and many a young lady leaned forward, eager to hear more about this outstanding claim, their beaus eagerly supporting them in their astonishment. Somehow, the already quiet room became even more hushed.

Westmeyer continued. "To make plain my meaning, I invite you to listen to a witness to these accusations. May I introduce the Countess of Oakfield, Lady Abigail Somerville."

The room began to slow as the murmurs spread outward. Abby felt the glare, and even envy, of dozens of eyes hanging on her in attention. Looking about, she saw every reflection in the mirrors doing the same. The whole world was upon her.

As the cold, deep waters of fear and uncertainty washed over her, she almost felt like she was drowning once more, as she nearly had all those weeks ago in the Thames. However, this time she chose not to let herself be swept away by the sinking currents. She stepped into it, boldly.

"Last summer, at the Battle of Vitoria in Spain, British soldiers abandoned their duty to pursue the retreating French so they could loot the Spanish territory they had just liberated for its wealth."

The room raised its voice in gasps of amazement at this news; cries and comments coming from every corner of the room. With the one exception, Abby noted: her immediate company, as Ulrich Westmeyer and George Pendleton could do nothing but drop their jaws in stunned silence.

"In June of last year," Abby continued, "the British managed to liberate Vitoria in Spain from their French invaders, but after the battle was over and Napoleon's forces fled, abandoning their booty,

the British forces abandoned their dignity by forgetting the war and filling their pockets with as much Spanish wealth as they could manage. In the eyes of God and our European allies, England has shamed herself by filling her army with misfits and thieves!”

“NO!” interrupted Westmeyer, “No, no! Please, the girl is hysterical! There is no proof that. None of this flight of imagination could possibly...”

As he spoke, Abby reached into the front of her dress and produced a letter. “I do not need imagination to produce a military record, Mister Undersecretary. I have in my hand a report from officers of General Wellington’s army, recovering in London, that Gavin Cork, a former private from Lord Pendleton’s region, Mersey Chapel, has recently returned to his hamlet after receiving a dishonorable discharge from the empire’s service for taking part in the looting. He was arrested, punished, and is now in my custody as an eyewitness to these affairs.”

Westmeyer snatched the letter from her hands and looked it over. But before he could prevent them, more partygoers snatched the letter from him and began looking over it, passing it around the room.

“It should be noted,” continued Abby, “that there are patriots in our fair empire who opposed the idea of funding the destruction of our reputation abroad, such as Baron Conrad Wallen in Shropshire. I can only hope that the government will be gracious enough to avoid taking any harsh measures against financial protesters, considering how valuable they have become in proving the empire’s moral character. It would not do for Spain to think England supports such thievery.”

“Baron Wallen is French!” cried Westmeyer, visibly seething. He turned to Lewis. “Tell them!”

Lewis Planter, watching this all unfold, turned to look at Tom Torinson, the closest officer holding him. The officer nodded slightly, and Lewis turned back to the undersecretary.

“I don’t know anything,” he stammered.

At this, Westmeyer grew beet red. “What are you...” he started. “Why...you told me...”

“I’m...I’m not sure of his heritage, sir. I barely know my parents’ landlord.”

Abby watched Westmeyer with trepidation, uncertain what he might do now. She was relieved, though not overly surprised, when

he rather sank his chin into his chest like an embarrassed child before rapidly turning on his heels and scurrying off into the next room.

The gathered company scoffed quietly, stifling their laughter.

"I'm certain," Abby said clearly, "that there are members of the judiciary here tonight who would be gracious enough to launch an investigation into this matter. Once our fun is concluded, of course. There is no need to ruin the evening."

"My Lady," Pendleton started to speak, embarrassed nearly to the point of speechlessness. "What is all this? Have you forgotten..."

"Yes," Abby said quietly, "We must speak privately, Lord Pendleton."

Paling, the older man followed Abby out of the ballroom and down the hall to the very room where he had recently spoken. He took both her hands in his and tried to hide his nervousness with a smile.

Abby squeezed his hands and returned his smile, but hers was sad.

"Lord Pendleton—"

"George, my dear."

"Lord Pendleton, I'm afraid I must disappoint you. I have learned many things over the past few days, and one of the things I have come to understand is just how lucky you are."

He looked confused but tried to recover. "Indeed, I am very fortunate that you have come into my life—"

"Yes. I am the perfect solution to your problem."

"My...problem?" Lord Pendleton leaned against a heavy wooden desk and crossed his arms, but Abby noticed that his hands were shaking.

"Many problems, actually. I can get you back into society again and restore your reputation. I can solve your financial difficulties. And through me, you can address Lieutenant Westmeyer's blackmail regarding the dishonorable conduct of your tenants in the war."

Lord George Pendleton was speechless, but his eyes were still hopeful.

"I did not wish to embarrass you publicly," Abby continued, not wishing to drag this out any further, "but I must disappoint you. I will not marry you, sir, and become the crutch on which you hobble away from your problems. And furthermore, you should be

ashamed of the way you attempted to manipulate my circumstances – and my emotions – to suit yourself.”

“Abby, my darling,” Lord George stammered, “my feelings for you are genuine, I assure you!”

“Your anticipation for the benefits I would bring was real,” Abby corrected him with a small smile. “And you may believe that you love me. However, I do not.” And with that, she turned and left the room, head held high.

But the look in his eyes stayed with her. There no anger in him, only sadness and loss. She pitied him.



* * *

She had waited eagerly for almost two months now to have her dear Connie back in her life. Now, though, as she sat in her coach looking out towards the front entrance of the Old Bailey, now that she could see him leaving the majestic building for the last time, she couldn't help but wish to watch his confident strides but a little longer. Here, before her, she got to see a sight she had worked hard to bring about. Her lover, Baron Conrad Wallen, walking freely. She wished for this memory to linger.

Abby flung open the door and allowed a dignified and stoic Baron Conrad to enter it. It wasn't until the door closed behind him and the coach began its long trip back to Mersey Chapel that she relented and flung her arms around his neck in the sweetest kiss she ever delivered.

“Oh Connie,” she cried, holding him firmly. “Connie, I'm so, so sorry!”

“Goodness, my love,” he laughed. “What in the world could you be sorry about?”

“So many things, darling. At the very least, I'm sorry you had to endure all this for me. I'm sorry that when we last saw each other, we left on such horrid terms!”

“For your love, I am eternally grateful, Abby,” Connie said happily. “I have to say, for you, I would endure everything and

more, if it meant I could see you again. It's rather strange, even comical. But, in all honesty, the most difficult time I had throughout this whole adventure was when you were convalescing after sinking into a cold river. I was so scared you would never awaken."

"Really," Abby looked at him, perplexed. "That was the worst part?"

"In a sense, yes. You, Abby, are able to handle yourself through many situations, but even you, I daresay, could not talk your way out of death."

"Ha! Fair enough."

"I have to admit, though, now that I have you here, I am hoping you can tell me a thing or two."

"Yes, darling?"

"Well, during my 'stay' at the Old Bailey, I learned many details of what transpired for you in these past months, but there are many gaps in your story that remain a mystery to me."

"Do tell," Abby grinned.

"Well," Connie continued, "for starters, how in the world are you so informed about military affairs? How did you know about what the army had done in Vitoria? All you said, was that true?"

"My goodness, could there be any doubt? Well, as you may remember, I went to the undersecretary originally to ask about Randal Tillery and Gavin Cork. I wish I had known then that Ulrich Westmeyer hadn't the slightest interest in helping me, and would never look into it."

"Really."

"Definitely not. Look at the lengths he went to make himself rich and punish those who didn't submit to his extortion. And after he was confronted about the looting in Spain, the first thing he did was release you, grateful he could discourage an official investigation. He was only interested in bettering his own circumstances, and had no convictions of any kind. I shouldn't be surprised that, when his plans started to fall apart, he abandoned them. He was a weak little man." She looked deep into Connie's eyes and smiled. "Not like some brave stalwarts I know."

Connie blushed. "But then, if not from him, then the news from the army..."

"Came from the army itself, Connie. You see, I met a few soldiers recuperating at the hospital, some weeks back. I got to

know one of them, Private Tom Torinson. I never asked him for his help, never asked him to put himself out, but he knew I wished to know the fate of the sons of my friends. When he was released, he just put in the effort himself! He contacted his fellow enlisted and his commanders; he asked around. It was the fraternity of the soldiery! They cast their nets wide and labored to ease a mother's broken heart. That little worm, Westmeyer, couldn't care less about the fate of these young unless it lined his pockets, but these true men, to whom I owed nothing, were willing to help me find my answers. For nothing more than kindness."

"Did you learn, Abby? About Mrs. Tillery's son?"

"Yes, actually. Randall died in Pamplona. He fought to liberate Spain, to free good people. I have no way to know if he participated in the looting that followed, so that's what I shall say to Mrs. Tillery, so she will at least have her dignity. She will believe he was just one more boy, one out of thousands, who won't get to wake up anymore."

"Unlike Gavin."

Abby sighed. "Yes, Gavin Cork. I ask you to be at least a little forgiving to him, darling. He was arrested, discharged, and even jailed for a time. I sincerely believe the reason he has locked himself up in his parents' home is because that war has shown him who he really was, and it shamed him."

The baron nodded. "There are few prisons in this world harsher than those we make for ourselves out of shame. I understand."

"Yes, though it became obvious that Lewis did not. All he saw were the idealized images of military life. He probably assumed he would return home in one piece, with all his doubts and problems magically solved for him. I knew that as long as he was convinced of that, he would always be a problem to you, and be quite willing to turn you over to the authorities for stopping him from living his dream. That's why I visited him not long ago, in the hopes of convincing him otherwise. It was fortunate that I was delivered Private Tom's letter, about his findings on Randal and Gavin. I couldn't say anything to convince Lewis, that immature little boy, but I thought a war-weary private like Tom would convince him that suffering wasn't all he dreamed it would be. The same way he got through to me."

"In the nick of time, evidently. I'm told that Lewis turned on Westmeyer at that ball."

“It certainly seems like I own Tom Torinson a lot of favors. I hope he finds peace in life after war.”

“So, you have vanquished two villains in order to secure my freedom.”

Abby seemed downcast at that comment. “Westmeyer, yes, though I’m not so certain about George.”

“Really?” replied Connie curtly, with just a hint of jealousy.

“About him, I am not certain. I had my suspicions about him early on. He claimed to have lost all of his connections after his divorce, but he was still able to arrange my meeting with you at the Old Bailey. And how did he find me at the hospital to extend his invitation in the first place? It didn’t quite add up, and I admit I only truly confirmed my suspicions at Breadalbane House when I saw the two of them colluding so comfortably. Though I suspected early on that George wasn’t being entirely honest with me. I will admit, he is very practiced in his words – he almost had me convinced that he would wish to marry me even if I weren’t a countess! But he gave himself away, going on and on about his lost marriage and its derived advantage. He was miserable that he could not live with his perverted sense of dignity anymore, and saw me as a woman whose wealth could bring back that advantage and make him rich and respectable again.”

“But you still give him the benefit of the doubt?”

“Yes, because I saw in his eyes that he did regard me tenderly, kindly. He lied to me about his intentions, yes, but I believe that he lied to himself first and foremost. Deep down, he wished to be a good and noble man. What he failed to understand, in the end, was that what he truly sought was his own salvation. It was a selfish choice, no matter what he might have felt for me.” Abby peered at Connie, and then rested her head against him. “I couldn’t trust him. Not like you.”

“Yes indeed,” Connie replied with a grin. “It takes a lot of trust to write me a letter like you did and presume I wouldn’t immediately break down in sorrow.”

“Well, I was hoping the message wouldn’t be too complex for you,” Abby teased. Connie snickered. He pulled out Abby’s rejection letter from his breast pocket. It wasn’t lost on Abby that he was keeping it close to his heart.

“It is pretty clever,” said Connie, looking over the letter again. “I send this letter to you, knowing full well that I can trust you, to

read this letter thoroughly, front to back.' Indeed. Front," he repeated, showing Abby the side of the sheet with the letter, "and back," he said, turning it over, revealing the portrait Ellie drew upon it.

It was an image of Abby as she had posed in her hotel, dressed for winter. And behind her, a scene that only Abby could describe for the artist: Connie, standing behind her, in the forests around Pendleton Hall, warming her hands.

"I remember that day," said Connie. "I cherish the memory. Thank you for sending me this. I knew, no matter what the message on the other side said, that this is what you truly meant."

"See," Abby added, "that is the difference between you and George Pendleton. For all his bluster and romantic gestures, he never respected me as a person. Not like you did, Connie. You trust me...and I love you."

Connie smiled, and it was the brightest, warmest smile Abby had ever seen. No sunny day in wintertime could ever compare.

"By the way," Abby added, "There was something else I need to apologize for."

"Really?" Connie asked. "And what's that?"

"I never actually got a chance to answer you. In the hospital. You asked if I would marry you. Connie, my dearest. Yes, I will happily marry you!"

Connie looked completely overwhelmed, which caused Abby's heart to skip a beat. He dove upon her, holding her firmly in his arms, as the carriage swayed to and fro, all the way back to their happier lives.

"I am so, so happy to hear it," he answered. "But, in truth, I figured. I trust you."

Abby smiled.

Afterword

Thank you so much for downloading and reading *Becoming the Countess of Oakfield*. I hope you enjoyed the story. It was a long journey to write and finish this book. Regency is a such a fascinating and wonderful period of history tinted with elegance, and a *savoir faire* that is unique and intricate. I hope this comes through in this book.

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